

**THE CONSIDERATION OF PERSONAL QUALITIES IN ADMISSIONS FOR
CANADIAN MASTER'S COUNSELLING AND COUNSELLING PSYCHOLOGY
PROGRAMS**

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Abstract

Research demonstrates the need for counsellors and psychologists to possess certain personal qualities to be effective practitioners (e.g., Jennings & Skovholt, 1999). However, the degree to which some of these characteristics can be taught during graduate school is questionable (Pope & Kline, 1999), and, thus, some researchers argue that personal qualities are an important factor to assess during the admissions process (Halinski, 2009; McCaughan & Hill, 2015). However, little is known about how personal quality considerations are incorporated into the admissions process for Canadian master's programs in counselling and counselling psychology. This study serves as a preliminary exploration of how a subset of Canadian faculty consider and assess personal qualities during admissions reviews for said programs. Participants were interviewed to explore the counsellor personal qualities deemed important by each individual as well as how such considerations currently, and might ideally, play into admissions decisions. Themes arising from these semi-structured interviews and their implications for future research and practice are explored.

Keywords: gatekeeping, admissions, counsellor education, personal qualities, counsellor characteristics, counselling psychology

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Chapter 1: Review of the Literature

The purpose of this research was to explore the admissions processes of Canadian counselling and counselling psychology master's programs, especially as they pertained to personal quality considerations. While counsellor personal qualities are widely cited as central to mastery (e.g., Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Pope & Kline, 1999; Wheeler, 2000), their consideration during admissions is neither well understood in general (Hernández, Seem, & Shakoor, 2010), nor in the Canadian context (Sebok & MacMillan, 2014). Thus, I conducted this research study to shed some preliminary light upon the assessment of personal qualities during admissions to Canadian master's counselling and counselling psychology programs.

The Counsellor's "Person"

A common notion in the therapeutic world is that a counsellor's "person" is important to therapeutic effectiveness (Brear, Dorrian, & Luscri, 2008; Hernández et al., 2010; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). This belief seems to grow from various foundations, perhaps partly from preeminent therapist Carl Rogers's early influence. In a reprint of his seminal 1957 article, Rogers (2007) asserted six necessary and sufficient conditions for personality (or client) change. Among these was a therapist's genuineness, empathy, and unconditional positive regard. Perhaps most obviously related to the "person" in terms of Rogers's (2007) position was his understanding of genuineness as involving a counsellor's ability to be "freely and deeply himself" (p. 242).

Furthermore, a salient characteristic of therapeutic change is the therapeutic alliance, or “the collaborative and affective bond between therapist and patient” (Martin, Garske, & Davis, 2000, p. 438). Thus, the ability to establish an effective alliance is also regularly referred to as a primary reason for certain necessary dispositions or traits in a counsellor, such as warmth, genuineness, and certain social skills (e.g., Brear et al., 2008; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999). In fact, various therapist personal qualities have been found to predict ratings of the therapeutic alliance (Heinonen et al., 2014). Attachment style has also been found to predict some variance in therapeutic alliance (Black, Hardy, Turpin, & Parry, 2005). Considering that the therapeutic alliance is itself a reliable predictor of outcomes, its development and building blocks are of special focus in counsellor training (Martin et al., 2000).

Finally, various researchers have rallied against the notion that good therapy can be reduced to mere application of technique, instead arguing that it is at least partly dependent upon therapist characteristics (e.g., Gallagher and Hargie, 1992; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Pope & Kline, 1999; Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005). Of course, various regulatory bodies agree, and as a part of ensuring competency in counselling professionals, these bodies have incorporated this position both explicitly and implicitly into their respective *Codes of Ethics*.

In Canada, two primary bodies govern the counselling profession: the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA) and the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA). While these professional bodies oversee separate professional designations (counsellor versus psychologist), both use similar codes of ethics for their

respective “brands” of therapy. In terms of the personal characteristic range, parts of the CCPA’s *Code of Ethics* (2007), such as section F9 *Self-Development and Self-Awareness*, explicitly address the need for counsellors to possess certain qualities and competencies in the intra- and interpersonal range (see also: Sections F10 and F11). This constellation of personal or professional requirements involves attributes such as self-awareness, integrity, responsibility, and ongoing self-growth.

The CPA’s (2000) own *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* also consistently requires competency from members, with undertones as well as explicit mandates for basic self-awareness, self-care, honesty, integrity, self-responsibility, openness, and an internal motivation toward both knowledge and growth.

In all, the notion that counsellors need to possess certain personal qualities or characteristics is common, and yet it is in many ways still not very well understood. Due in part to the subjectivity of personal qualities and the lack of consensus in terms of what makes for good therapy, necessary counsellor traits suffer from a lack of consistency, unclear behavioural markers necessary for assessment, and a lack of formal incorporation into many graduate programs (Brown, 2013; Henderson & Dufrene, 2012; Homrich, 2009; Sowbel, 2012). However, several researchers have studied and theorized about necessary personal qualities, offering insight into this important cluster of considerations.

Common Qualities of Effective Counsellors

In a British study, Wheeler (2000) asked counsellor educators to generate bipolar constructs (e.g., open/closed) to distinguish between specific trainees that they had known in their own teaching and could clearly use as examples of “good” and “bad”

counsellors. Most significantly, after conflating the constructs to find consensus among the counsellor educator ratings, the majority of descriptors fell in the personality grouping. In other words, the characteristics that appeared to be most salient in terms of distinguishing a good counsellor from a bad one were of a personal or “nonacademic” nature. The two other groupings of descriptors in the study were labelled as *Related to Learning* and *Counselling Skills*. Constructs related to learning involved intelligence, commitment, and receptivity to feedback while counselling skills constructs involved cultural awareness, maintaining boundaries, and being a good listener.

While these categories are clearly not mutually exclusive, it is still valuable to note the constructs that were often cited in Wheeler’s personality category. The top three bipolar constructs in this category were personable/aloof, open/closed, and secure/insecure. Wheeler (2000) described the first category, personable/aloof, as including desired qualities such as friendliness and warmth, while the second, open/closed, involved openness to experience, to change, and to others. The third category, secure/insecure related most to psychological stability or mental health. Other constructs in the personality category included attributes such as self-awareness, genuineness, and confidence.

In another study, Jennings and Skovholt (1999) interviewed “master therapists” – therapists who were peer elected with significant consensus as being excellent in their field. This study included ten therapists, mostly psychologists, but also three social workers and one psychiatrist. After interviewing participants about what made them effective therapists, nine themes emerged comprising three domains: cognitive,

emotional, and relational. In the cognitive domain, master therapists were seen (1) to be voracious learners, (2) to have extensive life and work experience as well as the commitment to learn from these experiences, and (3) to have a tolerance for, and gravitation toward, complexity and ambiguity. In the emotional domain, master therapists were (1) emotionally receptive (i.e., self-aware and nondefensive), (2) mentally healthy and mature (including authentic and self-caring), and (3) aware of the connection between their own emotional health and efficacy. Finally, in the relational domain, master therapists tended (1) to have strong relationship skills (i.e., to be good listeners, to be warm, and to relate well to others), (2) to believe in (and nurture) the therapeutic alliance, and (3) to be experts at facilitating therapy with their relational skills (i.e., to be supportive, provide safety, but still face tough issues and challenge clients appropriately).

In another study, Pope and Kline (1999) asked ten counsellor educator experts to rank 22 characteristics in order of importance for counsellor effectiveness. These characteristics were generated by the researchers through both a review of the literature and in consultation with counsellor educators. The top eight characteristics ranked by participants in this study as most important for effective counsellors to possess were empathy, acceptance, warmth, genuineness, sensitivity, flexibility, open-mindedness, and emotional stability.

As noted by several researchers (e.g., Henderson & Dufrene, 2012; Sowbel, 2012), an obvious theme or issue in the generation of categories of personal characteristics is the illusion of separation. Realistically, many of these characteristics are not mutually exclusive, with some qualities depending on others, and with some perhaps

subsuming several. Moreover, chosen categories are likely idiosyncratic to the researchers in question, to some degree. Unfortunately, the subjective and socially constructed nature of these descriptors provide limits to generating clarity and consensus, a factor often cited as interfering with clear mandates and established requirements in the field in terms of personal qualities or professional competency (Brear et al., 2008; Forrest, Elman, Gizara, & Vacha-Haase, 1999; Sowbel, 2012). Regardless, in a particularly helpful analysis, Halinski (2009) sought consensus among studies on the topic of effective counsellor characteristics by performing an extensive literature review and compiling a multitude of sources pertaining to the topic. After cross-referencing the sources, the top five most-cited traits were: warm and accepting, empathic, flexible, self-aware, and genuine. At the time of her cross-referencing, each of these traits had been mentioned in 23 to 27 of the articles she found on the subject.

Discovering Desired Personal Qualities Through Their Absence

In another vein, desirable personal qualities have been examined in the gatekeeping and remediation literature, but in terms of their opposites or absence. This literature often examines rates of impairment in graduate students, perceived types of impairment (or problematic behaviours), as well as remediation rates. Thus, many studies have generated lists of common deficiencies, offering another window into desired characteristics and perceived competence by examining the lack thereof or the opposite presentation.

For example, of 108 American clinical, counselling, and school psychology programs, the most commonly found problem behaviours in students were inadequate

clinical skills (65%), defensiveness in supervision (52%), and deficient interpersonal skills (42%) (Vacha-Haase, Davenport, & Kerewsky, 2004). In Brear and Dorrian's (2010) Australian study, unsuitable students were a concern due most often to lack of self-awareness or interpersonal problems. Other highly ranked issues in this study included lack of empathy, rapport-building failures, being judgmental, and failing to demonstrate adequate ethical understanding.

In another study, Brown-Rice and Furr's (2013) student participants reported that the most disruptive and worrying problems in their peer's professional competency involved difficulties regulating emotions. Alternatively, in a review of 14 relevant studies, Brear et al. (2008) found that the most common characteristics of unsuitability were problems of an intrapersonal nature, with the second most common being problems of an interpersonal nature. In other words, the seemingly subjective, "nonacademic", predominantly trait-based cluster of personal qualities appear to be what are reported most often as problematic and as interfering with trainee competency, particularly in terms of how counsellors regulate themselves and interact with others.

Interestingly, in her article, Schwartz-Mette (2009) acknowledged the need to deal with impaired students and recommended that students be encouraged to engage in better self-care in order to reduce impairment. However, she also presented this self-care as relying upon qualities such as self-awareness and self-regulation. In this conception, for a student (or more advanced counsellor) to avoid impairment she must possess certain qualities that perhaps would prevent her from being detrimentally impaired in the first place, at least to an extent. In other words, it may be that Schwartz-Mette offered trait-

based solutions to trait-based problems. This might be seen to provide some support for a threshold requirement of certain qualities in effective counsellors.

In this arena's own attempt to discover some consensus, Henderson and Dufrene (2012) performed a content analysis of the remediation literature and delineated eight categories of behaviours having to do with professional competence: "(1) ethical behaviors, (2) symptoms of a mental health diagnosis, (3) intrinsic characteristics, (4) counseling skills, (5) feedback, (6) self-reflective abilities, (7) personal life difficulties, and (8) procedural compliance" (p. 51). These categories help to clarify the variety of professional competencies and impairments often cited in the literature.

Of course, not all of these categories appear to relate directly or easily to the personal characteristics cited in this review so far. However, (2) symptoms of a mental health diagnosis, (3) intrinsic characteristics, (5) feedback, and (6) self-reflective abilities constitute significant overlap.

First, symptoms of a mental health diagnosis overlap in terms of suggestions for well-being, mental health, and emotional regulation (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Pope & Kline, 1999; Wheeler, 2000). However, this category is broad and could be said to elementally correspond to one's ability to regulate emotions and/or to relate well to others, constructs labelled elsewhere as intra- and interpersonal skills. Otherwise, this category's incorporation of specific impairments, such as substance abuse, are not exactly relevant here, and might still be better conceived of as symptoms of deeper personality or characterological issues.

Next, the construct of intrinsic characteristics seems the most relevant and is comprised of seven subcategories: (1) interpersonal skills, (2) maturity, (3) ability to deal with conflict, (4) flexibility, (5) cooperativeness, (6) ability to express feelings, and (7) capacity to handle stress. These subcategories are ranked in order of how often they were mentioned in the remediation literature, and as such, interpersonal skills and other personal qualities continue to be particularly salient (Henderson & Dufrene, 2012).

Similar to Wheeler's (2000) study, Henderson and Dufrene's (2012) counselling skills construct involves "behaviours that are taught through experiential as well as didactic instruction" (p. 51). For instance, instead of focusing on an ability to experience empathy, this category involves the *expression* of empathy. Thus, this category does not fall exactly into the personal quality category, though it is certainly a confounding variable.

The final two related categories of feedback and self-reflective abilities also correspond to the literature on necessary personal qualities of effective counsellors. First, feedback is a relatively straightforward category but involves receptivity and integration of feedback, similarly mentioned by Wheeler (2000) and others. Finally, self-reflective abilities involve self-examination, taking responsibility for oneself and having self-awareness of one's impact on others. This last construct is similar to constructs found widely in literature on necessary personal qualities (Halinski, 2009). Furthermore, both of these categories might be held as intrinsic characteristics themselves, and the researchers acknowledge that, at the very least, intrinsic characteristics might lay the foundation for other traits such as receptivity to feedback.

As can be seen, the conversation about students that are unsuitable (i.e., the functional opposite of suitable or effective counsellors) still rests upon the foundation of competency, a central element of ethical practice according to the regulatory mandates of the CPA and CCPA. According to Homrich (2009), competencies are “the observable and measurable behaviours that demonstrate acquired knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal attributes that are critical to successful job performance” (p. 6). In accordance with this, personal qualities are also conceptualized as falling under the purview of competency requirements, whether expressed negatively or positively.

Overall, while the constructs of desirable personal qualities may still be ill-defined, lack concrete behavioural anchors, and be confounded with one another, there still seems to be some consensus. First, there is some consensus that they matter in the first place. Second, there is some consensus about what qualities matter, namely: warmth and acceptance, empathy, flexibility, self-awareness, and genuineness (Halinski, 2009). Or, from Henderson and Dufrene’s (2012) analysis: interpersonal skills, maturity, ability to deal with conflict, flexibility, cooperativeness, ability to express feelings, capacity to handle stress, ability to take feedback, and self-awareness. It is promising that these two lists, obtained via different avenues, offer much overlap.

Gatekeeping

Gatekeeping in the field of counselling generally refers to “the evaluation of student suitability for professional practice” (Brear et al., 2008, p. 93). The gatekeeping process protects the well-being of both the profession in general, as well as clients in particular, by preventing professional membership of unsuitable candidates (Homrich,

2009). Thus, gatekeeping is often seen as an ethical duty since its function is to protect society (Kerl, Garcia, McCullough, & Maxwell, 2002). Furthermore, the *Codes of Ethics* from both the CCPA and CPA acknowledge and seek to enforce this imperative.

In terms of the CCPA (2007), their *Code of Ethics* requires that programs ensure professional and personal competency in trainees and fellow counsellors (Sections A7, A8, F1, F9, F10, F11). Further, the CCPA requires that programs establish and communicate clear expectations of competencies to students (Section F1), clear methods of evaluation of competencies (Section F4), and clear processes and policies of remediation and dismissal prior to program commencement (Section F6). In essence, the CCPA calls upon counselling training programs to gatekeep the profession in regard to the competency requirements of the profession.

Similar to the CCPA's code, the CPA's (2000) own code calls upon Canadian psychologists to demonstrate and ensure their own competency as well as to ensure that the duty of competency is met by others in the profession. This involves, among other things, refusing to train anyone who will harm others (Standard II.4) or who will fail to be of benefit to others (Standard II.7). This *Code of Ethics* also makes supervisors explicitly responsible for the activities of their supervisees, students, and trainees (Standards I.47, II.50, III.40, IV.31).

Even more to the point, the CPA (2009) published a document for the express purpose of guiding ethical and competent supervision. In this guide, the gatekeeping imperative of supervisors in counselling education is made explicit and is elaborated upon. Supervision, in this case, involves the training and education of counsellors in

general, and thus applies to teachers and administrators as well as to clinical supervisors. In this document, gatekeeping is a process that includes a variety of stages, such as granting degrees and providing licensure. At base, the CPA (2009) reiterates the imperative for supervisors to ensure that supervisees meet minimal levels of competence, are provided with appropriate remediation, and are either disallowed into, or dismissed from, the profession, if deemed unsuitable.

By passing through the various stages of gatekeeping (e.g., admissions, course work, exams, graduation, clinical supervision, licensure) educators, supervisors, and licensing bodies effectively endorse individuals as sufficiently competent or professionally able (Homrich, 2009). Thus, considering the consensus that personal qualities are important or elemental to counselling competency, the gatekeeping imperative is activated in their regard. While the professional mandates acknowledge this, there is no official method for carrying out this imperative during the education of counsellors, meaning that institutions design and implement their own procedures (Henderson & Dufrene, 2012). This is significant especially since the evaluation of trainees accounts for the majority of gatekeeping, as compared to post-graduate gatekeeping (Homrich, 2009). In essence, considering the relative consensus on the importance of some set of personal qualities in counsellors, it is the duty of counsellor educators, supervisors, and licensing boards to ensure their embodiment.

Responsiveness or “Teachability”

If certain personal qualities are necessary for adequate levels of effectiveness, and if ensuring competence is the duty of supervisors, educators, and administrators at the

educational level, then personal qualities become the concern of graduate training programs. Unfortunately, no systematic method for assessing or ensuring these qualities is relied upon (Henderson & Dufrene, 2012; Johnson & Campbell, 2004). Moreover, there is some evidence that counsellor trainees ought to possess certain qualities prior to admission in order to be able to reach sufficient competency levels.

For instance, in Pope and Kline's (1999) study, in addition to having counsellor educators rank the 22 characteristics of effective counsellors in terms of importance, they also ranked them in terms of responsiveness to training. These rankings included three possible values: 3—that it cannot be taught in a two-year master's program; 2—that it can be taught in a two-year master's program; or 1—that it can be taught in one semester of a master's program. The characteristics ranked as *least* responsive to training (in order) were emotional stability, open-mindedness, interest in people, acceptance, resourcefulness, sympathy, genuineness, empathy, confidence, friendliness, and tolerance for ambiguity. In the end, Pope and Kline combined the importance rankings and the responsiveness ratings to generate a list of characteristics that were deemed both most important and least responsive. The most highly ranked qualities here were acceptance, emotional stability, open-mindedness, genuineness, and flexibility. As such, these researchers discovered qualities that they argued should be incorporated into the selection of students into counselling programs since they were deemed both important and relatively unresponsive.

Furthermore, in her study revealing that personality was the primary distinguishing factor between “good” and “bad” counsellors, Wheeler (2000) explained

the seeming consensus that counsellors appear to be “‘born’ and not ‘made’” (p. 80).

While tentative in her assessment of this, she acknowledged that when admissions committees believe that students have the power to change and grow into effective counsellors regardless of personality or well-established traits and dispositions, they take risks in their selections—and hence in their gatekeeping imperatives.

In another relevant study, Kramer, Rappaport, and Seidman (1979) had untrained undergraduate student volunteers counsel their peers for a 30-minute period. These peer-counsellors were selected after being rated for “therapeutic talent” (levels of empathy, warmth, and openness during a group interaction). The highest- and lowest-scoring volunteers were selected to be the peer counsellors, and then randomly assigned into one of three groups, two receiving brief (2-hour) training in interviewing and the third receiving no training. After the audio-recorded counselling sessions, the counsellor, peer-client, and two independent judges assessed the counsellor on various measures, including effectiveness. Significantly, the peer counsellors in the high therapeutic talent group were rated as better counsellors by all raters in terms of overall effectiveness. The independent reviewers also rated them as more skilled on behavioural ratings of verbal responses (including positive reinforcement, asking personal questions, and spending more of the allotted 30 minutes speaking with the interviewee). Even more importantly, there were no significant training effects in the study, meaning that the 2-hour training sessions did not impact counsellor effectiveness ratings.

Kramer et al. (1979) presented these results as providing support for the notion that certain individuals are better suited for therapeutic work than are others. In what they

term the “talent vs training” controversy, these researchers suggested that talent appears to be necessary for counsellor competence and thus should be considered in the selection of students for counselling graduate programs.

In another pertinent study, Gallagher and Hargie (1992) found that there was no clear association between the use of discrete behaviours that are typically taught to counsellors to show empathy, acceptance, and genuineness (such as reflective statements, questioning, and nonverbal behaviours) and the actual ratings of experienced (or perceived) empathy, acceptance, and genuineness. This was especially true because of the lack of correspondence between these ratings by the different raters (counsellors, clients, and independent judges). Perplexed by these results, Gallagher and Hargie suggested that Rogers’s necessary conditions are perhaps not reducible to mere behaviours (or “microskills”), but rather are more globally felt or held attitudes and dispositions that involve myriad behaviours (verbal and nonverbal) expressed differently by each person. In this sense, teaching trainees to perform certain microskills does not necessarily ensure the actual embodiment of salient personal qualities.

In all, if certain personal qualities are judged as both important and unresponsive, and therapeutic talent or a basic disposition toward relevant characteristics is judged as necessary to counsellor efficacy, then the need for certain qualities to be present prior to commencing graduate studies seems especially crucial.

Where Might Counsellor Competency Originate?

If certain traits or qualities are perceived as necessary prior to counsellor training, an important area of exploration involves the genesis of such qualities. In general, in a

survey of nearly 5000 psychotherapists from around the world representing diverse theoretical orientations and therapeutic fields, Orlinsky and Rønnestad (2005) found that highly developed therapists were more influenced by personal experience, personal therapy, and practical work experience than they were by academic training or supervision. Furthermore, these therapists reported baseline levels of certain characteristics already present when embarking upon training, such as “the ability to engage others in a helping alliance, the capacity to empathize with others who differ from oneself, an aptitude for being natural in personal encounters, and a knack for communicating understanding and concern to persons in distress” (p. 176). As such, these researchers argued that such characteristics are a necessary part of the therapist’s success that must exist both at baseline and later on, and they conceived of these qualities generally as interpersonal skills.

Similarly, after comparing Norwegian and German psychiatrists and psychologists in terms of what most influenced professional development, Lorentzen, Rønnestad, and Orlinsky (2011) concluded that “the profession seems to have little influence on perceived development as a psychotherapist, and it is reasonable to conclude that other therapist qualities, often personal qualities, are more important for therapeutic processes and outcomes” (p. 151). While a bold statement, some others seem to agree.

According to Skovholt and Starkey (2010), in terms of what should produce competence, “the academic culture suggests it should be science; the practitioner culture suggests reflection on practice; [and] candid discussion with practitioners suggests that the therapist’s personal life is the richest source of knowledge” (p. 125). Skovholt and

Starkey argue that being an excellent therapist “mainly involves developing, at a very high level, as a person” (p. 126). Of course, this sort of statement is easy to deconstruct to a point of some absurdity, since no development of a human being is not development “as a person”. This may be too pedantic of a stance to take, but academic and professional development still can be argued to fundamentally develop one’s “person”. However, their point can still be conceded if it ultimately tries to get at something other than what is traditionally thought of as the academic cluster of skills, abilities, and training (i.e., high grades, academic background, or the demonstration of discrete microskills).

Considering the basic findings explored here that suggest that academic practice does not correlate well with counsellor success, it seems that other ingredients need to be added in order to generally promote excellence in counsellors, and specifically to ensure that programs follow their gatekeeping imperatives. In this, if counsellors are made in part by who they are as people, then ensuring such qualities or histories in counselling students becomes crucial, once more.

Rates of Unsuitable Students

Research on impaired students has shown some troubling statistics in terms of the rates at which unsuitable students are admitted to, and granted degrees by, programs. For instance, some studies have found average faculty-reported rates of unsuitable students in counselling programs to be around 10% (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002) with others estimating this number to be around 14% (Brear & Dorrian, 2010).

In studies with counselling students, ratings of impaired or unsuitable peers tend to be higher than faculty ratings, with one study’s participants estimating an average of

three problematic peers in each of their programs (Rosenberg, Getzelman, Arcinue, & Oren, 2005) and another reporting that 74% of student respondents observed classmates with problems of professional competency (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013). In another study, Gaubatz and Vera (2006) compared faculty and student assessments of impaired trainees and found that nearly 9% of enrolled students were deemed to be poorly or marginally suited for the profession according to faculty, while students estimated this number to be just under 22%. The estimates for students who gateslip (i.e., move through programs without remediation) were estimated at 2.8% by faculty compared to 17.9% by students.

Furthermore, 44% of faculty in one study indicated passing students that they considered unsuitable for the profession (Wheeler, 1995) and another study reported that 45% of deficient students were allowed to continue unchecked (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002). In a study with 63 Australian counsellor educators, Brear and Dorrian (2010) reported that students unsuitable for the profession were found in most classes, and that around half went on to graduate. In this case, about one third of unsuitable students were reported to leave on their own, meaning that faculty reported intervening in only a sixth of the cases. Brown-Rice and Furr (2013) also found that of the 389 master's students they surveyed, 78% expressed worry about the profession because of unsuitable students passing, and 70% expressed frustration at seeing programs let deficient students graduate.

As an aside, explanations for the higher student estimates vary. It may be that students have better access to their peers and thus clearer perceptions of them (and many students agreed with this reasoning), or perhaps the relative inexperience of counselling trainees influences misperceptions of peer competency (Rosenberg et al., 2005).

Overall, gatekeeping practices are seen as inadequate at least to some degree both because of the presence of unsuitable students and because of the proportion of these students who graduate without intervention (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Gaubatz & Vera, 2006; Schwartz-Mette, 2009).

Admissions as Gatekeeping

As a response to problematic rates of unsuitable student graduates, much of the gatekeeping literature focuses on within-program solutions such as improving teaching, evaluation, and remediation, effectively ignoring the admissions stage of gatekeeping (e.g., Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013; Schwartz-Mette, 2009; Vacha-Haase et al., 2004).

However, being selected for graduate work in counselling is seen by some to be the first stage of gatekeeping (Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010) and as one not to be neglected (McCaughan & Hill, 2015; Sowbel, 2012). Considering that poor rates of remediation and dismissal are commonly reported, that faculty explain that it is difficult to dismiss unsuitable students once they have been admitted (Helmes & Pachana, 2008), and also that the burden of proof for a rightful dismissal falls squarely on an institution's shoulders after admission (Sowbel, 2012), grounding gatekeeping intentionally and sophisticatedly in the screening stage seems wise. Furthermore, many researchers agree that gatekeeping should focus, at least in part, on the admissions stage (e.g., Hernández et al., 2010; Homrich, 2009; McCaughan & Hill, 2015).

In fact, the Health Service Psychology Education Collaborative (HSPEC; 2013) recognizes adequate admissions as a necessary part of responsible education. HSPEC is an American collaborative that recently explored various improvements necessary for

professional psychology education, although it does deal chiefly with doctoral-level psychologists. Regardless, one of their recommendations included the need to admit students who will be appropriate both for the profession and for study, as based upon a variety of “minimal qualifications” including, for instance, an “ability to act ethically, work well with others, self-regulate, and reflect on their own and others’ views, behavior, and mental processes” (p. 416). To this end, this committee recommended the use of coursework, standardized tests, templates for letters of recommendation that encourage special attention to relevant competencies, and “an expanded interview of applicants, potentially using approaches from a best practices toolkit” (p. 416). While this collaborative is American and does not oversee counsellors, it still sees personal qualities as central to sound practice—an important endorsement.

Designations in Canada

An important aside here involves the added complication of multiple designations of counselling professionals in Canada. This plurality further confounds gatekeeping procedures and professional standards since there are many routes into the broad profession of mental health services. For instance, one can practice as a marriage and family therapist, as a counsellor, mental health therapist, counselling psychologist, clinical psychologist, and so on. While this issue is too complicated to adequately address here, this review chiefly focuses on the counselling and counselling psychology professions, though they are not easily or even necessarily meaningfully delineated from their counterparts. Still, in focusing on two particular professions, the complications in the education and licensing of these two professional clusters needs some exploration.

While counselling and counselling psychology are often seen as only moderately distinct (Bedi, Sinacore, & Christiani, 2016), and as often subsuming or being subsumed by the other professional titles, they are still distinct professions at least in terms of designation.

For the title of *counsellor* or *psychotherapist* (or a correlate), no province or territory provides an exclusive right to practice, though three provinces do regulate and reserve the title (i.e., Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec). In all other territories and provinces, certification is voluntary and the title of counsellor is not protected. In other words, in these places “anybody” can call themselves a counsellor or therapist, whereas in Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec, a person can technically provide counselling but cannot use the province’s official statutory title (Canadian Information Centre for International Credentials [CICIC], 2016a).

In all of Canada (excluding the Yukon Territory), the title of *psychologist* is exclusively reserved and regulated, meaning that an individual must be registered, licensed, or certified to practice (CICIC, 2016b). While the CPA (2016) is the formal accrediting body in Canada and provides some guidance to provincial regulators, each province also has its own independent body for regulating the profession. This means that diverse systems and requirements exist in each province, with some provinces allowing individuals to practice as psychologists after obtaining a master’s degree while other provinces require a doctorate. Moreover, the requirements can also vary in terms of the content of the required master’s degree and the details of post-graduate supervision, hence representing divergent and often idiosyncratic expectations.

What is most relevant about this system is the fact that two people with identical backgrounds, training, and mental health professions (in the sense that both can spend their days doing the same “work”) can have two different designations that are independently and diversely regulated. Thus, because a person can practice after obtaining a master’s-level graduate degree as either a certified counsellor or a registered psychologist (depending on the province), admissions processes become even more important because fewer gates may be passed through (Sebok & MacMillan, 2014). Moreover, because a person can become a psychologist, a widely-protected designation, without obtaining a doctorate degree, gatekeeping, including the admissions stage, is of vital importance.

Admissions Practices

Of course, admission into graduate programs for counselling and psychology is often rather hard to achieve (Fauber, 2006), so gatekeeping imperatives are being enacted at least to some degree and in some way. However, the nature of admissions has been scrutinized in some of the literature, though still relatively sparsely. For example, admissions processes are found to be unbalanced in their focus on academic criteria over and above nonacademic criteria (Homrich, 2009; McCaughan & Hill, 2015) and the criteria used for screening often show poor predictive value for counsellor competency (e.g., Kendrick, 2012; Piercy et al., 1995).

In the first place, although looking only at American doctoral counselling programs, Nelson, Canada, and Lancaster (2003) surveyed 25 programs to determine typical admissions procedures. All programs reported using letters of recommendation,

almost all used goal statements and interviews, and the majority used work history and statements of philosophy. Interestingly, while most programs found interviews helpful, they also reported the most problems in this category due to informal and unstructured processes. While all programs used letters of recommendation and still rated them as somewhat helpful, they also indicated that they were of most concern since they fail to effectively discriminate between applicants. Participants indicated that these letters were often overly positive and thus that they typically fail to alert faculty to problems.

In another study, as the basis for their selections, 21 clinical training program directors in Australia ranked grades as the most important selection criteria, followed by honours thesis work, then interviews, and then previous experience. However, some programs in this study did not use interviews at all, citing them as problematic (Helmes & Pachana, 2008).

In their survey of 79 master's-level counselling programs, Swank and Smith-Adcock (2014) found that the top screening measures used were letters of recommendation, grade point average (GPA), and personal statements, followed by interviews and standardized tests. Notably, once these data were collected, faculty reported a variety of methods for coming to admissions decisions ranging from clearly ranked ratings, to a list of prioritized items, to informal processes of faculty discussions. Nelson et al. (2003) had similar findings, with faculty indicating various decision-making strategies from the pure use of intuition and subjective decisions to established algorithms for generating rankings. In another study of master's-level counselling programs, Nagpal

and Ritchie (2002) found that admissions decisions used both subjective and objective sources of information and involved individual and/or group decisions.

In closer relation to the topics reviewed here, some studies have demonstrated that master's-level admissions committees for counselling programs balance both academic and nonacademic considerations. For example, in Nagpal and Ritchie's (2002) study, three themes emerged in terms of criteria used: professional attributes (goals, motivations, preparedness), personal attributes (maturity, flexibility, emotional stability), and interpersonal skills (presence, social appropriateness, and verbal skills).

Similarly, in Ziomek-Daigle and Christensen's (2010) study, participants reported evaluating candidates from the categories of both academic aptitude and interpersonal criteria. Academic aptitude was assessed using submitted application materials such as GPA, letters of recommendation, and academic history. Interpersonal or nonacademic criteria were assessed more informally through interviews and other in-person interactions undertaken after initial academic screening. However, respondents acknowledged that certain items in the academic category (such as personal statements) relayed important nonacademic information as well. Notably, these two studies were small, using only nine and eight faculty members, respectively (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010).

Though limited, these various studies seem to demonstrate first that approaches to admissions are varied and second that personal qualities are indeed considered during admissions to some programs. However, the approaches to assessing such qualities are diverse and often informal.

Predictive Power of Admissions Measures

In terms of the predictive power of selection criteria, some of the typically used data points are not as useful as one might hope. For instance, in a longitudinal study with 80 master's-level counselling graduates, Smaby, Maddux, Richmond, Lepkowski, and Packman (2005) found that neither GPA nor Graduate Record Examination (GRE) scores were predictive of scores on the Counselor Skills and Personal Development Rating Form. While both undergraduate GPA and the Verbal subtest of the GRE were predictive of scores on the Counselor Preparation Comprehensive Examination (CPCE), this exam is an academic assessment of counselling knowledge and is not known to be indicative of personal development or personal qualities related to counselling. Thus Smaby et al. (2005) assert that admissions committees need to incorporate selection criteria other than the GRE and GPA in order to adequately assess for relevant personal development.

Similarly, in investigating data for 152 students in an accredited master's-level counselling program, Kendrick (2012) found that GRE scores as well as GPAs were related to CPCEs but not to skills assessments. Like Smaby et al. (2005), Kendrick (2012) suggested using additional admissions criteria tailored to the assessment of personal qualities necessary for counsellor success.

In their analysis of data from 142 master's-level counselling students from a single program, Bethune and Johnson (2013) found that while undergraduate GPA was predictive of graduate GPA, personality measures explained more of the variance in internship evaluations. In other words, a personality test used during admissions was better able to predict professional competency than was GPA. On the other hand, and of

particular interest, ratings generated from a preadmission workshop (including interviews and role plays) were *not* predictive of either GPA or internship ratings.

In another similar study, Piercy et al. (1995) looked at data from 34 family therapy doctoral students over nine years. While both letters of recommendation as well as student autobiographies were positively predictive of the number and prestige of future publications, they were not predictive of clinical, academic, or research success. This was especially true of clinical success since the other two factors showed some moderate relationships. On the other hand, the age of the student as well as past clinical experience were predictive of clinical ratings, perhaps demonstrating that life experience and actual client experience are relevant to clinical efficacy. Perhaps most interesting yet again is that the interview ratings from admissions were not predictive of anything, though the researchers acknowledged that this might be due to the limited range in ratings once applicants reached that point in the admissions process.

Ratings of counsellor trainee effectiveness have also been found to be associated with various personality measures from the MMPI-2 (Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2; Williams, 1998). In this study, Williams (1998) compared scores on the MMPI-2, administered during the admissions stage, with counsellor effectiveness scores taken after an intensive practicum course. These latter scores were obtained using the CERS (Counselor Evaluation Rating Scale), which, according to Williams, is thought to rate counsellor trainees on their “understanding [of] a counseling rationale, counseling practice with clients, and exploration of self and counseling relationships” (p. 33). Williams’s study looked at scores on the CERS for 56 master’s-level counselling trainees

enrolled in their first practicum course in their program. Thus, she investigated how personality factors were related to beginning competency levels.

In the end, Williams (1998) found that several score categories on the MMPI-2 were significantly associated with better CERS scores, or, in other words, with better counsellor effectiveness. Specifically, counselling effectiveness was rated higher for students who had obtained lower hypochondriasis and paranoia scores during admissions. Williams (1998) explained that these lower scores are associated, respectively, with “conscientiousness, alertness, and a sense of physical wellbeing”, and with “appropriate interpersonal sensitivity, trust, and maturity” (p. 74). Counselling effectiveness was also rated higher for students with lower social introversion scores, scores that are “commonly found in individuals who are warm, outgoing, and verbally fluent” (p. 74). Furthermore, this last MMPI-2 variable had the greatest impact on scores of counsellor effectiveness. Williams tentatively concluded that personality characteristics appeared reliable in predicting counsellor effectiveness.

In all, academic measures do not appear to predict later counselling and clinical effectiveness as well as personality measures do, though interviews seem to be of questionable value. Though more research is required, many of these discoveries lend traction to the need for nonacademic or personal quality assessments of applicants.

Medical School

The need for personal quality measures in admissions for other disciplines has also been explored in the literature, especially in terms of medical training. In fact, in

reviewing the literature, many more studies appear to investigate personal quality measures in the medical field than in the counselling and psychology field.

In one example, Lievens, Ones, and Dilchert (2009) found that personality measures (especially conscientiousness) were associated with success in medical school. An especially significant finding here, however, was that personality measures (particularly extraversion and openness to experience), while not predictive of success in the short term, were predictive of success in the long term. The researchers suggested that while early medical education might rely more on academics, the need for interpersonal skills increases later in medical school when students are involved in practical learning activities such as internships. In other words, Lievens et al. (2009) explained that “performance in professional education (e.g., law, business administration, pharmacy, medical school) over the years becomes less reliant on the acquisition of declarative knowledge and incorporates more strongly interpersonal and motivational qualities” (p. 1528).

Notably, Patterson et al. (2016) reviewed 194 studies to evaluate the use and effectiveness of various screening measures for medical school. In the articles where personal statements were studied, these statements had mixed reviews in terms of effectiveness, with reportedly poor predictive validity and reliability. Patterson et al. explained that their use “may unfairly cloud the judgement of individuals making selection decisions” (p. 42). References had a “good level of consensus...[as] neither a reliable nor a valid tool for selecting candidates for medical school”. Finally, interviews were widely reviewed. Though they were a dominant screening measure for medical

school, “traditional interviews lack the reliability and validity that would be expected of a selection instrument in a high-stakes selection setting” (p. 46). These researchers also reviewed more structured interviews and found them to have improved reliability and validity over traditional interviews. As a summary, Patterson et al. explain that “across most evaluation criteria, traditional interviews perform poorly” but “when interviews are structured and based on a thorough role analysis, with standardized questions, trained interviewers and appropriate scoring, they can be reliable and valid” (p. 48).

While Patterson et al.’s (2016) review looks only at medical school screening measures, this data should still provide some basis upon which to begin to evaluate screening measures used in counselling and counselling psychology programs. As such, there is questionable validity and reliability for many of the screening measures that seem to be principally used in these processes.

The Need for Research and the Current Study

As can be seen, there are a multitude of compelling reasons to assess for personal qualities during admissions to counselling and counselling psychology programs. First, professional guidelines and ethical mandates call on counsellor educators to gatekeep the profession in regard to personal and professional competence (CCPA, 2007; CPA, 2000, 2009). Second, due to the presence of intra- and interpersonally impaired students in graduate programs, as well as the number of students graduating despite impairment (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Gaubatz & Vera, 2006), the gatekeeping imperative is especially important at the point of admissions (McCaughan & Hill, 2015). This is additionally so because of the purported lack of trainability of some necessary competencies (Pope &

Kline, 1999), as well as the propensity for nonacademic experiences to be cited as the principal avenues through which competency is gained (Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005). Other reasons include the complications of the professional landscape of counselling in Canada (with relatively few gates in some cases; Sebok & MacMillan, 2014), the poor predictive power of academic measures for counselling competence (Kendrick, 2012), and the recommendations and provisions for nonacademic assessments in other disciplines (e.g., Mountford, Ehler, Machell, & Cockrell, 2007; Peskun, Detsky, & Shandling, 2007; Sowbel, 2012).

Unfortunately, despite compelling reasons for the incorporation of personal qualities during admissions, research on admissions in counselling and counselling psychology programs in Canada is virtually nonexistent (Sebok & MacMillan, 2014). Further, even with the few studies on this topic in other contexts, very few studies address the specific incorporation of personal qualities into admissions processes (Hernández et al., 2010). Also, knowing how a small group of American or British faculty members consider and assess personal qualities in applicants or students does little to inform us of how similar faculty are doing so in Canada. It may be that findings here will be the same or similar, but, on the other hand, considering the different context and the variety of designations and programs, protocols may be quite different in Canada. As such, a large and exceedingly important gap exists in the literature, and it is this study's intention to begin to fill it.

Chapter 2: Methodology and Methods

In this chapter, I review and justify my choice of methodology as well as the specific methods used in this study. First, I explore the purpose and goals of my research and why these are well met by a qualitative research methodology. Next, I explore my chosen methods, including sampling, recruitment, data collection, data analysis, and relevant ethical considerations. Finally, I disclose my own journey to and motivations for this research in order to clarify my position and potential influence on this study.

Methodology

Purpose

The purpose of this research study was to preliminarily explore how Canadian faculty consider and assess personal qualities during the admissions process to counselling and counselling psychology master's programs. Considering the literature reviewed in the previous chapter, there are compelling reasons to assess for personal qualities during graduate school admissions and thus to explore how these gatekeeping duties are performed in the Canadian context.

Personal qualities have been widely cited as important to counsellor effectiveness or mastery (e.g., Halinski, 2009; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Wheeler, 2000). Here, the term *personal qualities* generally refers to qualities that are considered “nonacademic”, often labelled as personal or personality characteristics, intrinsic characteristics, therapist characteristics, personal competencies, and so on (e.g., Heinonen et al., 2014; Henderson & Dufrene, 2012; Homrich, 2009; Jennings, Goh, Skovholt, Hanson, & Banerjee-

Stevens; 2003). A plethora of qualities are included in these categories, including warmth, emotional stability, self-awareness, authenticity, and non-defensiveness.

Considering the consensus that counsellor personal qualities are important to effective counselling, it follows that graduate training programs have been assigned the ethical imperative of gatekeeping in regard to them (CCPA, 2007; CPA, 2000, 2009). However, many programs do not have formalized gatekeeping procedures to deal with admitted students who prove unsuitable (Vacha-Haase et al., 2004) and further gateslipping in these cases is common (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002, 2006). Worse yet, remediation is especially avoided in the cases of intra- or interpersonal deficits (Elman, Forrest, Vacha-Haase, & Gizara, 1999) despite these types of deficits being cited as most common (e.g., Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Henderson & Dufrene, 2012).

Bernard and Goodyear (2004) have explained that graduate programs in counselling generally offer admission to students with the expectation and intention that those students will eventually graduate (as cited in Homrich, 2009). As such, students are endorsed to a certain extent at the admissions stage itself. Considering the failures in gatekeeping after admissions, enacting the gatekeeping imperative during the admissions stage seems wise. Furthermore, the ability to teach personal qualities during graduate school is questionable (Pope & Kline, 1999; Wheeler, 2000) and counsellor competency and personal development is commonly thought to stem from experiences outside of graduate school (Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005; Skovholt & Starkey, 2010).

For these reasons and more, researchers have argued that gatekeeping should begin during the admissions stage to graduate programs to better satisfy the ethical duty

to protect society in general and future clients in particular (e.g., Halinski, 2009; Homrich, 2009; McCaughan, 2010). However, international research focused on how counselling faculty consider applicant personal qualities during the admissions process is limited (Hernández et al., 2010). Even more problematic is the dearth of literature examining how these processes are managed in the Canadian context (Sebok & MacMillan, 2014). As such, the current exploratory study provides important preliminary insight into how applicant personal qualities are considered and assessed during the admissions stages for master's counselling programs in Canada.

As reviewed in the previous chapter, the professional landscape of Canadian counsellors and psychologists is complicated by the ability to practice with a master's degree. Considering that most gatekeeping happens during graduate school (Homrich, 2009), and that the master's route to counselling practice provides fewer gates than the doctoral route, the need for personal quality assessments at the admissions stage is increased (Sebok & MacMillan, 2014). For this reason, I chose to focus exclusively on master's programs.

Goals

In conducting this research, I sought to discover how admissions committee members in Canadian master's-level counselling and counselling psychology programs consider and assess personal qualities in applicants. First, I wanted to understand the basic process of the admissions stage at each represented institution. I also needed to understand the personal qualities that participants deemed important for counsellors to possess, and how they conceived of them. After these explorations, I sought an

understanding of how these qualities either were or were not currently addressed during the admissions processes at each participant's institution. I wanted to know if participants thought that personal quality assessments were important, and how they imagined the admissions process being ideally performed in light of them.

To clarify, this study involved three main research questions, the latter two of which were subquestions:

- 1) How do admissions committee members in Canadian master's-level counselling and counselling psychology programs consider and assess personal qualities in applicants?
- 2) What personal qualities do admissions committee members consider important in counselling practitioners and why?
- 3) If deemed important, how might admissions committees ideally assess for relevant personal qualities in applicants?

Qualitative Research, Epistemology, and Other Assumptions

My methodological focus was to execute a basic interpretive study without attempting to truly embody a more specific research methodology. An approach like phenomenology is richly complex, and working from such a framework would take expert-level understanding and application. Thus, I chose what Patton (2015) has called a "generic qualitative inquiry" which involves a more pragmatic approach using general qualitative methods to discover "what is happening in programs and other human settings" (p. 155). Merriam (2009) herself called this generic inquiry "basic" qualitative research and explained that it is the most common type of qualitative research. While

Patton (2015) argued that this type of inquiry can be done separately from the “explicit theoretical, philosophical, epistemological, or ontological tradition” (p. 55), I will still explore such assumptions which were present in my research. Moreover, the appropriateness of qualitative research itself is important to justify.

Qualitative research as social research. Willis (2007) defined methodology as involving “the broad principles and guidelines that orient our research work” (p. 229). In the broadest sense, my research topic, purposes, and questions clearly indicate a qualitative methodology. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative studies see meaning as socially constructed and these studies therefore involve a general inquiry into how people construct, interpret, and attribute meaning within their worlds. In this sense, qualitative research is fundamentally *social* research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), a quality that is inherent to my topic here.

Considering that I investigated traits that are themselves socially constructed as well as the social consideration and assessment of those traits (i.e., during admissions), I studied something with a fundamentally social nature. For instance, a personal quality considered in the admissions process such as *self-awareness* is hard to define, let alone measure, and thus a qualitative approach produced greater depth and a more multi-faceted exploration of such a complex construct. Furthermore, the explicitly social and subjective nature of such qualities meant that my research was well met by the same inherent nature of qualitative research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Even if consensus is established in terms of *genuineness* being a highly desirable counsellor quality and as being, in some way, consistently considered by admissions

committees, we still encounter, and must grapple with, the plurality of just what genuineness *is*, how various parties conceive of it, perceive it in others, and assess it. Thus, complexity and social embeddedness will meet us at nearly every step. Even if a quantitative study is considered, critics of positivism argue that approaching an inherently social phenomenon in such a way is ultimately reductive, ignoring important complexities and thus rendering the research flat or inadequate (Scott & Usher, 1999). In this sense, my research was best served by a qualitative approach that allowed for a more descriptive understanding of complex social phenomena.

Participant perspectives. Interpretivist (or qualitative) research “takes everyday experience and ordinary life as its subject-matter and asks how meaning is constructed and social interaction is negotiated in social practices” (Scott & Usher, 1999, p. 25). In addition to being social constructivist and in providing more nuanced descriptions of social phenomena, qualitative research was appropriate for my inquiry since it is “interested in the perspectives of participants, in everyday practices and everyday knowledge referring to the issue under study” (Flick, 2008, p. 2). At base, my research sought insight about personal qualities in admissions by speaking with individuals involved in this social practice. It is important to note that I did not seek a wide or surface-level understanding of Canadian protocol in this regard, nor did I seek to overgeneralize results to the Canadian context. Rather, my inquiry was exploratory and sought in-depth dialogue with certain individuals in order to add to the discourse on the subject at hand, an endeavour better provided by a qualitative lens and methodology (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

Echoed by Creswell (2012), qualitative research does not seek generalization but rather seeks an “in-depth exploration of a central phenomenon” (p. 206). In this sense, my goal was to understand the social phenomenon from the perspective of some of its chief “players” rather than to determine ultimate truth (Willis, 2007). Both Willis (2007) and Creswell (2012) have stressed that qualitative research seeks understanding within certain contexts and from the perspectives of participants.

The consideration and assessment of personal qualities during admissions is an inherently social process, a phenomenon that is both performed by and done with (or perhaps to) people. Thus, it could be argued that one of the sole paths to generating insight into how faculty members undertake this process is to ask them. Furthermore, the process of considering personal qualities during admissions is complex and subjective, and participant perceptions are central to understanding how people engage in this process and for what self-stated reasons. Attempting to understand admissions regarding personal quality considerations from a quantitative perspective would be inevitably thin, lacking the complexity inherent when a phenomenon is determined by multiple individuals interacting in subjective and multifaceted ways (Scott & Usher, 1999).

Consciousness. While my study was not phenomenological, a relevant aspect of phenomenology does help to explain a part of my generic qualitative approach. Of central focus in phenomenological research is “consciousness”, since perception and understanding by participants is the main currency (Willis, 2007). In other words, the phenomenological researcher seeks an understanding of an individual’s own perception (or consciousness) when it comes to a particular phenomenon. In my case, I sought to

understand admissions, a phenomenon inextricable from consciousness. Personal qualities such as *genuineness* are perceived and held in individual minds, even if they are considered and assessed as socially enacted and socially constructed traits. This means that when a faculty member considers an applicant's level of genuineness, she does so in her own mind, even though she is inextricably influenced by social construction and even if she does so as a part of her admissions committee's own protocol. She must, in her own mind, define, understand, and conceive of genuineness as well as determine its presence. Thus, studying admissions processes means studying consciousness at least partly. In this sense, faculty carry certain beliefs about personal qualities themselves and about how they are formally and informally considered and assessed during admissions processes. Though my study was not phenomenological, helpful approaches and conceptualizations within phenomenology were relevant to my research approach.

Social constructionist epistemology. In terms of foundational beliefs or biases about what can be known about the topic at hand and how we could go about knowing it (i.e., the epistemology), I approached this research largely from a social constructionist position. This approach holds that social construction and social experience are inherent to the topic of personal qualities in counselling competence and counselling admissions. Such constructionism means that it is impossible to objectively know, definitively and forever, what qualities are important, why, and how those qualities are currently and ideally assessed, either universally or with any clear sense of determined truth. Thus, my research was immediately rooted in a realm that does not believe in one discoverable truth for this topic.

Considering this underlying philosophy of social constructionism, Patton (2015) has aptly explained that “a constructionist would seek to capture diverse understandings and multiple realities about people’s definitions and experiences of the situation” and that “a constructionist qualitative inquiry honors the idea of multiple realities” (p. 122). This basic position was foundational to my approach in that I attempted to explore multiple perspectives and to honor those various perspectives. Furthermore, I approached any consensus that was discovered from a social constructionist viewpoint as well, tending to position such a consensus as not “[residing] in the phenomenon but rather in the group that constructs and designates the phenomenon’s essence” (Patton, 2015, p. 121). This last point is particularly important, though nuanced, as it indicates that even when I discovered seeming consensus, I did not necessarily stop there, believing an “answer” to have been found. I was eager to see how other participants’ viewpoints, especially when diverging from this consensus, could add complexity to the picture or could draw attention to the apparent intersubjectivity as demonstrably shared, but not necessarily fundamental or universal.

Overall, my research was positioned within the world of qualitative inquiry, both because it was exploratory and because it sought complex and subjective information about a social phenomenon. In turn, this methodological framework served as the foundation upon which I built my specific methods, informing my choices of sampling, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. These topics will be explored in detail in the following section.

Methods

According to Willis (2007), methods are the specific “procedure for collecting and analyzing data” (p. 229). As previously mentioned, my research followed generic interpretive methods, including conducting semi-structured interviews and subsequently spending much time with the data to identify both overarching themes and salient or unique participant contributions. The methodology of my study also informed my sampling and recruitment choices.

Sampling

Considering the intention of obtaining a better understanding of a very particular phenomenon, purposeful sampling was a fitting choice for participant selection in this study (Creswell, 2012). According to Creswell (2012), purposeful sampling involves directly targeting participants (or sites) best able to elucidate a particular phenomenon. Thus, I sought participants with specific qualifications and experiences to generate better understandings of admissions processes as they relate to applicant personal quality considerations. Specifically, I sought out Canadian faculty members who have served on admissions committees for graduate counselling and counselling psychology programs at some point in the past five years.

My sampling was aimed at selecting individuals who represented the “most typical or most developed case(s) for studying the phenomenon” (Flick, 2008, p. 28). In this sense, Flick (2008) described seeking people with experience with the issue at hand or people involved in the highlighted practice. Since my research asked for participants interested in discussing how personal qualities are considered in admissions to relevant

programs, not only were the requirements fulfilled by way of inclusion criteria (e.g., type of admissions committee, recent service), but participants self-selected based on their inclination to the topic. Still, my fundamental inclusion criterion was that faculty members had served on a relevant admissions committee in the past five years and, in this sense, “a specific professional position or function is the criterion in the background of [my] sampling decision” (Flick, 2008, p. 30). Furthermore, I was interested in conversing with participants about personal qualities deemed important to the practice of counselling, and another clear and purposeful agenda in speaking with experienced faculty was to access experienced voices, especially those intimately involved with counsellor education.

My participant selection also involved some form of “maximal variation sampling” since I reached out to a variety of faculty members across Canada. However, it is important to note that in reaching out across Canada, I did not intend to survey or properly represent Canadian counselling and counselling psychology in general or as a whole, but rather to create some form of variety in my responses. Creswell (2012) explained that this type of sampling is purposeful not only in terms of who or where is chosen, but in terms of seeking to “represent the complexity of our world” (p. 207). In this sense, I sought participants who were spread out across both Canada and different institutions to provide a better chance of variation in responses.

Sample size. I aimed to interview between six and twelve people. According to Patton (2015), there are “no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry” (p. 311). However, sample sizes are often quite small in qualitative studies, as the research seeks

depth and not breadth (Creswell, 2012). Due to the lengthiness of my interviews, I had a plethora of data with satisfying variety after six interviews. Though qualitative researchers often determine sample size by seeking saturation or redundancy (i.e., the point at which data appear to repeat), Morrow (2007) explained that “true redundancy can never be achieved ... because of the uniqueness of each participant’s experience” (p. 217).

Ultimately, I had to create an arbitrary end to data collection in order to meaningfully work with the data already collected, despite knowing that I was necessarily missing many additional unique voices. Because this study was truly preliminary and exploratory, six participants were adequate to find trends, discover unique contributions, and to begin an exploration of the topic. Furthermore, the data proved fruitful in answering my research questions, thus demonstrating effective sampling (Patton, 2015).

Recruitment

I recruited participants in a variety of ways. First, I attempted to recruit through the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA) as well as through the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (CCPA). The CPA included my recruitment posting (Appendix A) in a newsletter specifically intended for their Counselling Psychology Society. I also had a recruitment posting placed on the CPA Counselling Psychology blog. Through the CCPA, my recruitment document was distributed by email to the Counsellor Educators chapter.

Due to low response, I subsequently sought approvals from eight Canadian universities across the country. I attempted to reach out to schools that held a variety of accreditation statuses, and that were labelled as either counselling and as counselling psychology. After selecting eight programs, I undertook ethics reviews as needed to permit me to email faculty directly, after which point I sent an invitation to participate to relevant faculty with my recruitment document attached. My recruitment poster also included an invitation for readers to pass along the request to anyone who might be interested. Similarly, I asked participants to pass the document on to anyone across Canada who they felt would be an important voice in this discourse.

Once an individual expressed interest in participating, I set up an interview time and sent the informed consent document (Appendix B) for the participant's review. Because most of my interviews took place over the phone, the consent form was sent prior to the interview to give participants time to review it. At the beginning of the interview, participants were invited to ask questions about the study or the informed consent and then were verbally briefed on the informed consent form before being asked if they consented. All participants consented to participate, to be audio recorded, and to the use of direct quotations.

Ethical Considerations

All documents used in this study were approved by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research at Memorial University as well as by relevant Research Ethics Boards at institutions requesting them. The informed consent form followed Memorial University's template to ensure the inclusion of necessary

information. As such, participants were informed about a wide variety of information such as what the research involved, risks and benefits, withdrawal protocols (i.e., of self and/or data from the study), data collection and storage, confidentiality, anonymity and privacy concerns, as well as detailed contact information for me, my supervisor, and the Research Ethics Board at my institution.

Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time during the study. They were also informed that they could withdraw their data from the study following participation in the interview until a set date of data aggregation.

Data Collection

Interviews. I conducted one-on-one interviews with participants to engage in discussion about the topics at hand. In line with an interpretivist agenda, the interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility in direction and response. As opposed to a more quantitative interview style, Willis (2007) explained that semi-structured interviews encourage interpretation, interruption, improvisation, and other less-rigid styles of seeking understanding of participants' experiences and worldviews. Furthermore, both Scott and Usher (1999) as well as Patton (2015) have argued that semi-structured interviews allow the participant to set their own agenda and to go in idiosyncratic, personalized directions while still maintaining some researcher structure and guidelines.

Creswell (2012) himself has suggested that researchers "ask open-ended questions so that the participants can best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher or past research findings" (p. 218). In this sense, the semi-structured

interview style fulfilled the qualitative demand for richer reports, accounting for context and more nuanced subjective perceptions while also providing some freedom from the researcher's agenda (Willis, 2007).

Interviews were conducted over the phone or in-person (in one case) and lasted between 55 and 90 minutes. The interviews were semi-structured with a general set of questions prepared prior to the interview (Appendix C). Questions were often asked verbatim, but not always, just as not all questions were always asked. Some interviews took interesting turns and decisions were subsequently made about directions to pursue considering both the amount of insight provided by the participants, as well as the scope of this research project. The structure of the interviews generally addressed, in order:

- 1) How admissions were currently undertaken at the participant's institution, in some detail;
- 2) What personal qualities a participant deemed important to the practice of counselling (including much elaboration regarding definitions, reasoning for importance of traits – sometimes framed as consequences for possessing or not possessing said traits, perceived teachability of traits, and desire for a student to possess said characteristics prior to graduate studies); and,
- 3) An exploration of how current admissions addressed the stated traits or how they could theoretically and ideally do so.

Of course, as in any semi-structured qualitative research interview, some interviews focused more on certain topics than others, or on otherwise unexplored areas of relevance to the topic at hand.

Importantly, Patton (2015) mentions the need for good rapport, as well as trustworthy and nonjudgmental listening to conduct profitable interviews. In this, my training as a counsellor served me well. I focused on truly listening as well as bringing myself genuinely into the conversation in hopes of generating meaningful and in-depth conversations where participants felt comfortable and engaged.

Semi-structured question design. In designing the semi-structured questions, my supervisor helped to ensure that I was asking questions that were clear and appropriate and that would serve my research questions. I also inquired during the first interview for feedback about the questions asked. I made many notes as I moved on to subsequent interviews, often revising how I asked questions to more effectively prompt exploration.

A notable stage in the development of these questions was deciding upon terminology. At first, I was using ‘personal characteristics’ instead of ‘personal qualities’, and for a while I considered using ‘*personality* qualities’. To come to a reasonable conclusion, I asked several psychologists and academics how they would answer the question about which personal qualities were important to counselling. I then discussed with them how they may have answered differently if I had asked about ‘*personality* qualities’ instead. It seemed that some people naturally went toward discussing personality (e.g., the Big Five) even when prompted with the term ‘personal qualities’, but that if I used ‘*personality* qualities’, they would more certainly stay within the realm of personality constructs. Thus, in order to leave the question more open and to allow participants to answer more idiosyncratically, I chose the more general term that allowed for personality constructs as well as a wider diversity of traits.

Ethical considerations. To protect participant confidentiality, participants were invited to select a pseudonym for the course of the interview, if they desired. If they did not choose to select one, I indicated that I would not use the participant's name during the interview. Furthermore, identifying information was not solicited during the research interviews, though it did occasionally arise. In these cases, I omitted the identifying information when transcribing the interviews to anonymize the transcript data as much as possible.

In terms of data storage, transcripts were stored on my password-protected computer in encrypted files until the research thesis was completed. Audio files were also stored on my password-protected computer and were not labelled with any identifying information.

As per Memorial University Research Policy, data must be retained for five years. Thus, all transcripts, interviews, and other materials from this study are stored on an encrypted flash drive in a locked cabinet in my supervisor's secure office on campus until 2022, at which time the data will be destroyed.

Data Analysis

Transcription. Like many beginning researchers, I chose to transcribe my own interviews to stay close to the data. I found this very fruitful as it allowed for much insight into the data gathered. I noticed things I likely would not have otherwise noticed, and I was able to improve upon my practice in subsequent interviews by reviewing how I had conducted them so far. In these ways, my study's design and analysis was emergent (Merriam, 2009).

Ongoing analysis. Merriam (2009) has suggested ongoing analysis to maximize the potential for creating coherent results. There are many ways in which I attempted to embody this ongoing process as a researcher. Principally, I engaged in reflective and reflexive practice throughout data collection and analysis. In addition to transcribing as I went along, I spent a lot of time reflecting on each interview in order to carry all that I had learned so far into subsequent interviews. Sometimes this lent a greater openness to my interviews since I became increasingly aware of the complexity of some of the issues at hand and could probe more sufficiently into these topics. At other times, it meant posing questions to subsequent participants that I thought embodied what one or more earlier participants had brought forward. All of this made the data analysis richer and more meaningful as opposed to merely interviewing and discovering convergence and divergence at the end.

In addition to trying to bring past information into subsequent interviews, I worked very hard to allow information shared from each participant to stand on its own. I wanted to create space for new information away from my own biases and preconceived notions, as well as away from the data collected so far. This chiefly meant that I had to practice self-awareness and reflection every step of the way. One of the most helpful practices for this was engaging in discussions with trusted peers and my supervisor to process what I was hearing in the interviews and what effects the interviews were having on my own thinking. I also engaged in journaling to facilitate this process and to create records of my changing mindset and the connections I was making between interviews.

By the end of the interviews, I had spent many hours reflecting upon the data and actively comparing what I noticed in each interview.

Rudimentary analysis. After the interviews were complete, I listened to each interview again to check for accuracy in the transcripts. During this time, I made notes about each part of the interview, whether this meant recording salient contributions, connections between interviews, or detailed answers to specific research questions. This step created greater coherence in my subsequent coding. All of these steps described so far are what Merriam (2009) has referred to as “rudimentary analysis” where I “[generated] insights and hunches about what [was] going on in [my] data” (p. 174).

Coding. After reviewing each transcript, I created an organizational system in order to work with the transcripts effectively. Once I had established this system, I began formally coding each interview, which I did by hand on color-coded interview print-outs. According to Merriam (2009), “coding is nothing more than assigning some sort of shorthand designation to various aspects of your data so that you can easily retrieve specific pieces of the data” (p. 173). As such, I coded each interview, using codes generated in early interviews in subsequent interviews as well as developing new codes as I went along. Sometimes I used symbols or keywords, and other times I used short phrases. Importantly, I coded analytically with the intention of reflecting deeply on what had been said and meant and interpreting this data abstractly, rather than merely describing the data (Merriam, 2009).

Categorizing. After coding, I spent a great deal of time organizing codes into categories, working to do justice to what I perceived as the intent of the participants, and

to organize the data into a coherent and meaningful system. As Merriam (2009) described, “the construction of categories is highly inductive. You begin with detailed bits or segments of data, cluster data units together that seem to go together, then ‘name’ the cluster” (p. 182). Many categories arose easily because of the frequency of similar contributions. Other categories were more complex, based either on idiosyncratic contributions or abstractions from the data.

Because this research was so preliminary and exploratory, I did not seek to develop a theory or a concrete answer to my research questions. Rather, I sought to discover themes and patterns of response to generate insight into the topic at hand. In many ways, however, these themes and patterns were interconnected, and thus, they will not be discussed in purely atomistic ways. In other words, my discussion culminates in an overall reflection on the topic and an attempt to synthesize some of the arising themes into a preliminary answer to my research questions.

Analyzing personal qualities. A notable idiosyncrasy in my data analysis arose due to the complexity of one of my research questions: “What personal qualities do admissions committee members deem important to the practice of counselling?” While this topic overlaps with the other categories, I dealt with it separately. Since I had asked this research question explicitly to participants, the analysis generated a long list of these qualities with complex and entangled answers. This was further complicated by the fact that answers to this question could be extrapolated from much of the interview separate from when the question was specifically asked. For example, a participant might speak about the importance of various interpersonal skills during an admissions interview as a

means of projecting counselling adeptness into the future. Thus, I would include these as answers to this research question. Most of the time personal qualities mentioned outside the specific question did correspond to the answers given at the time of specific prompting, but not always.

Even more complicated was deciding upon the unit of analysis best suited for coding and categorizing this set of data. For example, many participants would mention *empathy*, but then either go on to define it variably or to elaborate upon the construct and end up speaking about other perhaps separable categories (e.g., such as *warmth*, *openness*, and so on). As such, I decided to focus on smaller units of analysis, often isolating keywords and creating categories this way. In doing this, I kept the data close to categorize it in a way that was true to the perceived intent of the participants. In the end, I had to make judgment calls that often involved separating categories into smaller categories, even if a participant had grouped such qualities together. I have attempted to be as transparent about this process as possible in both presenting and discussing the results.

Ethical considerations. When working with the data, all transcripts were anonymized and only identified by participant number. These transcripts were printed privately in my home and were kept secure until they were transferred to my supervisor's locked cabinet.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Due to the subjective nature of qualitative research as well as the degree to which the researcher herself is inextricable from the research design, execution, and

interpretation, qualitative research often attempts to manage this subjectivity by increasing and making explicit a study's fairness, trustworthiness, and credibility (Morrow, 2005). Morrow (2005) defined this "goal of fairness" as "representing participant viewpoints equitably and avoiding lopsided interpretations that represent the biases of the researcher or only a few participants" (p. 255). There are a variety of ways to achieve such a goal, several of which were employed in my study.

For example, I sought credibility and trustworthiness by engaging in a literature review in as open a way as possible during data collection. This enabled me to open my mind to current research and discourse on the topics and to reflect on my own biases and interpretations. Most of all, the literature put me in closer contact with the sheer complexity of these topics, lending a relativism to my exploration once I was made more aware of new considerations and multiple perspectives.

In conducting my interviews, I made sure to focus on understanding and exploring the participants' perspectives, leaving my own agenda aside. As in counselling, I focused on empathy and reflection in order to make each participant's perspectives central and to establish my role as an active facilitator.

During data collection, member checking is often used to enhance validity (Creswell, 2012). While I chose not to send transcripts or interpretations back to participants, mostly due to the time this demands from participants, I did focus on preliminary member checking during interviews. I was careful to reflect back to participants what I heard them saying in order to verify that I was understanding. This

helped to avoid simply projecting my own preconceived notions and kept me open to what the participant was sharing.

To ensure credibility and trustworthiness in phenomenological research, the researcher's own interpretations are supposed to be "bracketed" in order to better hear and understand participants (Merriam, 2009; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). While my research was not specifically phenomenological, this "bracketing" still represents a general way of increasing credibility and trustworthiness. Though it is impossible to remove the researcher from the data, I engaged in a great deal of self-reflection to maintain awareness of my own position and how that might be impacting the research (e.g., through journaling and discussions with peers and my supervisor). I also attempted to bracket myself by focusing on participants, asking participant-centred questions, and generally maintaining awareness of where my biases might be taking over during interviews, analysis, and presentation of the research.

In addition to the above measures, my role and position in this research should be clarified. Morrow (2005) explained that "one tradition that has become a standard in qualitative research is that of making one's implicit assumptions and biases overt to self and others" (p. 254). Because the researcher herself is inextricable from data collection, analysis, and presentation, it is important to be transparent about the researcher's own biases and position. This disclosure should give readers a better chance of interpreting the research study within a fuller context. Furthermore, because a constructionist viewpoint validates multiple perspectives, the researcher's own perspective is also valid (Patton, 2015). Thus, I will outline my own journey to this research topic to be transparent about

the context of this undertaking and the assumptions that were present, even if bracketed, within my thinking.

Biography. When I first embarked on graduate school in counselling psychology, I was met with a few barriers. My formal background to that point was chiefly in philosophy and education, meaning that I did not qualify for most Canadian programs. No matter, I happily applied to a variety of programs in the United States. To my surprise, I was accepted to every institution to which I applied (“Ivy League” included), some with modest scholarships.

Upon attending one of these schools, however, I was dismayed to see that the acceptance rates were quite high and that the bars for admission seemed to be lower than I expected—a factor which might explain my high acceptance rate. Unfortunately, I was also not very satisfied with my program. This was chiefly due to my perception that the high cost was not necessarily matched by a truly superior education. As such, I left to upgrade and apply to Canadian programs after all. At this point I was not sure that I would be guaranteed the caliber of program that I desired, but at the very least I did not want to pay nearly one hundred thousand dollars for it.

When I applied to Canadian programs after upgrading with regular and honours psychology courses, as well as with added research, volunteer, and work experience, I was accepted to very few programs despite surpassing minimum requirements. The juxtaposition between my acceptance in the United States and in Canada should by now be clear. Despite the many reasons for the intense competitiveness of Canadian programs, the frustration I felt about my difficulty in gaining admission stemmed partly from the

belief that I was not admitted despite possessing what I believed would *best* ensure my position as a competent counsellor: commitment, passion, self-awareness, and a decade of independent study and practice exploring the field and my own “self-as-instrument”. I did not think this made me entitled to admission, but I figured it should help.

Furthermore, I had waited until I felt professionally, academically, *and* personally prepared before seeking admission. In other words, I had supplemented my near perfect academics and strong research, volunteer, and work experience with personal development. In the end, it seemed to me that having an honours psychology degree and even more research experience was more important than the kind of person I was. And perhaps this was the way it should be, though I personally doubted it.

I share this all because it was a large part of my growing confusion about what was (and what might be) considered during admissions and what it all meant for me, my career, and this profession, most of all. I knew that I was being rejected in favour of more “suitable” candidates, but that also begged a lot of questions about suitability. And yet, was it not a positive thing that gaining admissions to counselling psychology programs in Canada was so hard? Why was it so easy to get into American programs? Did I notice a difference between programs in terms of the caliber of student? Why did so few Canadian programs seem to use admissions interviews while most of the American ones to which I applied had an interview or something like it? Did this make a difference? Did programs even care about personal qualities? Did they think they could teach them?

The comparison of admissions between the United States and Canada, as well as the comparison of my experience of the programs and my peers once admitted, deepened

my curiosity about how the profession of counselling psychology is governed and safeguarded during the admissions stage. My commitment to the practice of counselling also involves a great deal of protectiveness over, and investment in, the field in a variety of ways—at this point particularly regarding admissions and counsellor education.

Unsurprisingly, in beginning this research, I was very much biased in favour of personal qualities being considered in admissions reviews. While I am well aware of the complexity of how this could be done expertly, this bias has remained throughout the research, even while it has faltered. As one of my participants put it best, this position is underpinned both by personal experience and research. However, I worked hard to boundary this bias, to avoid merely confirming what I already thought, and I certainly still entertain the idea that purely academic—or at least less subjective—admissions requirements are our safer bet.

It is also important to disclose how deeply my quantitative mind lurks in the background of this research as well. While I worked from and generally embody a constructionist approach, there is a positivist within me that will not die. This means that I am often uncomfortable about the notion of including personal quality considerations without some standardizing or validating structure in place (another rabbit hole). This bias certainly came into play during this research, at the very least in my own reflections. The positivist within me also means that my bias toward recruiting excellent scholars and scientists remains just or nearly as strong alongside my bias about requisite personal qualities being involved in proficient counselling. I do not refrain from wanting it all (something our professional guidelines also seem to allow themselves).

If anything, I think this level of complication within my own perspective deepens my ability to have conducted this research meaningfully. I have been pulled by most of the perspectives that I have encountered, and I have been open to various ways of conceiving of the topic. In another sense, I have tolerated the constant ambiguity that exists in this research, as opposed to avoiding or minimizing it, and as such, I have been more attuned to nuance and complexity.

Summary

In this chapter I have sought to describe and justify my choice of methodology and methods. I have attempted to be accountable to the many choices that I have made along the way and why I made them to produce research that is transparent. I have done this in part with the hope of empowering the reader to be better able to reject or accept my findings. In detailing my methodology and methods, I have also attempted to shed light on my own journey to this topic and the biases and experience that I have brought into it.

Chapter 3: Results Overview and Participant Backgrounds

Overview and Organization of Results

This chapter outlines how my results are presented and provides brief information on participants and their backgrounds to contextualize the results that follow. Following this chapter, my results are divided into two chapters to enhance clarity and readability. The first chapter (Chapter 4) analyzes the admissions process in general, including participant reflections on the process, on their roles as committee members, and on how applicants are specifically assessed. The second chapter (Chapter 5) concerns applicant personal qualities in terms of how such qualities intersect with the practice of counselling, admissions in particular, and graduate school and the profession in general.

To set a clear stage, my research focused most of all upon graduate admissions processes as they involved personal quality considerations and assessments. However, there are many themes that arose that stand as somewhat independent from the consideration of personal qualities, concerning instead admissions in general. Therefore, I present these more general results first in Chapter 4, leaving discussions of personal qualities of counsellors and graduate students in regard to admissions for Chapter 5. Of course, because the research interviews were anchored to the foundation of my research topic (personal quality considerations during admissions), there is overlap between the chapters where topics concerning admissions in general make some mention of personal qualities. These topics were kept in Chapter 4 since they pertain more obviously to the process of admissions in general. I came to think of this chapter as involving both *how* admissions processes were done at the institutions represented in my study as well as how

participants reflected on those general processes. On the other hand, Chapter 5 deals more specifically with how the ideal personal qualities of counsellors intersect with approaches to admissions, graduate school itself, and the profession as a whole.

To further set the stage, before discussing the intersection of personal qualities and admissions in Chapter 5, I first present an analysis of the personal qualities that participants deemed important for counsellors to possess, outside of admissions considerations. This section can stand alone as results not pertaining to admissions, but it provides context and foundation for the remainder of the chapter. Thus, the latter part of Chapter 5 concerns the intersection of personal qualities with the admissions process, graduate school, and the career of a counsellor. It is also important to note, as will be clarified more later, that ideal personal qualities of counsellors naturally overlapped with the ideal qualities of graduate students. At times this was explicit in that the conversations focused upon the need for graduate applicants and students to possess certain qualities in order to later possess those qualities as professional counsellors. At other times, perhaps because the research interviews were grounded by an exploration of admissions, participants naturally referred to graduate applicant and student qualities as a means of explaining their thoughts on the professional qualities of counsellors. Most of all, these topics are inextricable, as the need for certain personal qualities during admissions was usually framed as ultimately about the future career of that applicant.

Overall, both chapters relate to graduate school admissions in counselling, but Chapter 4 does so in general while Chapter 5 does so only in regard to personal qualities, and only after personal qualities of counsellors are independently explored. Furthermore,

Chapter 5 moves away from admissions at other points to explore graduate training and the profession itself as those topics themselves intersect with the topic of personal qualities of counsellors.

I have included the following table to aid in the understanding of my results presentation:

Table 3.1

Thematic Organization of Results Chapters

<p>Chapter 4: Admissions in Counselling</p> <p>Theme 1: Descriptions of, and Reflections on, the Admissions Process</p> <p>Theme 2: The Role of the Committee and its Members</p> <p>Theme 3: Assessing Applicants</p> <p>Chapter 5: Counsellor Personal Qualities and Admissions</p> <p>Theme 1: Personal Qualities Important to Counsellors</p> <p>Theme 2: Assessment of Personal Qualities during Admissions</p> <p>Theme 3: General Considerations for Personal Qualities and Graduate School</p>
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For simplicity, this table does not include the many subthemes contained within each theme. A description of the themes and subthemes can be found in Appendix D.

Participant Backgrounds

To provide context in which to further understand the research results, it is important to know some details of the participants' backgrounds and experiences. Thus, in this section I provide brief information about the programs at which the participants are faculty, the clinical and academic experience of the participants, as well as other relevant information. However, due to the small and connected community of counselling and counselling psychology faculty in Canada, it is important to protect the identities of participants in this study and thus to limit the information divulged. Therefore, I do not present a separate biography for each participant, rather presenting details about the participants in aggregate with some individual attributes identified. Furthermore, I have

generalized or eliminated some of the more identifying admissions information. This should protect participant anonymity and confidentiality.

In total, six participants were interviewed in my research study. All participants were employed as counselling or counselling psychology faculty in Canadian graduate schools located in five different provinces across Canada. All had participated in an admissions review in the last five years, with most indicating active (or current) participation. There was a mixture of program types from which the participants hailed, with some labelled as Counselling Psychology programs and some as Counselling. As well, some programs were accredited by the Council on Accreditation of Counsellor Education Programs for the CCPA and some were connected to doctoral programs accredited by the CPA. Programs varied in terms of their degree (e.g., Master of Education, Master of Arts).

Four participants were male and two participants were female. The average service on admissions committees was 12.5 years, ranging from 6 to 27 years. On average, the participants had worked for roughly 21 years as counsellors or psychologists, though many endorsed working clinically only part-time. A wide range of theoretical orientations were represented among the participants including Rogerian, Cognitive-Behavioural, Humanistic, Existential, Feminist, Multicultural, Interpersonal, Narrative, Experiential, Object-Relations, Relational-Cultural, and Solution-Focused.

Finally, I have used randomly chosen pseudonyms to refer to each participant: Adam, Emily, John, Lynn, Mark, and Paul. This study's participants represent six

individual experiences of the admissions process and six individual perspectives on the consideration of applicant personal qualities in counselling and admissions.

Chapter 4: Results – Admissions in Counselling

This chapter presents the results corresponding to the category of *Admissions in Counselling* and contains three themes. The first theme is entitled *Descriptions of, and Reflections on, the Admissions Process*. It analyzes participant discussions pertaining to the methods used for current admissions reviews as well as general reflections on that process. This theme contains eight corresponding subthemes.

The second theme in this category is entitled *The Role of the Committee and its Members*, and it contains four subthemes, each addressing some aspect of how the participants reflected upon and viewed their own role (or their committee's role) in the admissions process. This theme largely deals with the power that committees have and the ways in which committees ensure fairness during screening.

The third theme in this category is *Assessing Applicants* and gathers and analyzes dialogue pertaining to how applicants to counselling and counselling psychology programs are specifically assessed during admissions reviews. This theme contains four subthemes.

Theme 1: Descriptions of, and Reflections on, the Current Admissions Process

The first theme in this chapter covers interview content that corresponds to the admissions process in general, especially as it pertains to a description of how admissions reviews were currently conducted. Admissions in general means that themes concerned the process of admissions in the represented programs separate from personal quality considerations specifically. Subcategories in this section explore the process and

evolution of admissions and admissions decisions, various application criteria, as well as constraints to the process. Further, gatekeeping and gateslipping are both addressed.

The details about admissions protocols presented here are not intended to be exhaustive representations of the participant's member programs. While I asked participants to explain how admissions reviews were conducted at their institutions, the research interviews did not cover the complexity of such processes in perfect detail. Furthermore, to protect anonymity, some admissions protocols must be generalized to make programs unidentifiable.

Evolution of process. All participants referred in one way or another to an evolving admissions process. For example, Emily explained that “everything’s always evolving” and that due to faculty changes, there is a “constant kind of shifting as we bring new minds and ideas in”. In this spirit, many participants referred to changes that had been discussed in the faculty group (i.e., adding interviews to the admissions process) or else to changes that had been made in the past or that they themselves hoped for in the future. As John explained, “we keep on trying to refine our system to gatekeep”.

Others referred to changes to admissions protocols in recent years as a response to arising concerns. For example, one program clarified what it meant to have a ‘background in psychology’ to better differentiate applicants, and another incorporated standardized interview questions to control idiosyncratic interviewer styles. One participant indicated that admissions at his institution used to be performed by a single individual but had shifted years ago to the use of collaborative admissions decisions made by the program faculty.

Emily explained that “each year we are talking before this process, we’re talking during, we’re talking after, and saying, you know, what things do we need to tweak? So, the interview questions get tweaked. Sort of the weight accorded to academic performance gets revisited, that sort of thing”.

Finally, Mark put such changes to admissions in the context of the evolving profession of counselling and psychology itself. He explained that the profession was a “changing landscape”, especially because of the “mobility of [Canadian] counsellors [where] professionals in one province who can be registered there, can go to another province without any further training”. Mark also highlighted other complications such as “the PhD versus the master’s” and “the classification of psychology”. He concluded: “it’s all morphing into something other than what it’s traditionally been. I don’t know where it’s going..., I don’t know even if it’s a good thing, but it’s going”.

Application criteria and stages. In exploring what criteria were used to assess applicants, there was some overlap. For example, all participants endorsed that the admissions process at their institution reviewed GPA and/or academic background, work and volunteer experience, and letters of reference. Additionally, all participants indicated the use of some sort of statement of intent, sometimes called a letter of intent, rationale, or statement of interest.

On the other hand, some admissions criteria were used more variably. Three participants indicated a review of psychology or other specific coursework, and only one participant indicated the use of research experience as a part of the review. Half of the participants indicated the use of interviews, with two reporting the use of individual

interviews and one reporting the use of group interviews. One participant also indicated that students were required to submit counselling-related work samples.

In terms of the sequence of admissions review steps, at least half of the participants said that their programs employed an initial “rule in/rule out” stage based on certain requirements being met (e.g., minimum GPA, years of experience, or degree type). At least four participants indicated that university staff, program directors, or graduate school employees were responsible for the preliminary review of the files, in at least two cases including the power to admit or not admit, and in the rest of the cases only compiling and readying the files for faculty review. All represented programs seemed to involve a process of individual file review (and often ranking of applicants) followed by a collaborative discussion to make further rankings and/or to establish who would be admitted.

At least half indicated that applicant files were divided for review, or, in other words, that not all faculty on the admissions committee would see each file closely. However, as will be discussed later, all participants indicated that their programs required that each file be reviewed by more than one faculty member (usually two or three). Decisions about who would be admitted seemed, in all cases, to be made by a core faculty group or the entire faculty group in the master’s program. However, one participant did indicate that an applicant could occasionally be admitted by one faculty member arguing his or her case and then usually agreeing to be that person’s advisor. In this case, the participant explained that if problems were to arise with the student, that faculty member would be responsible for helping that student. In other words, consensus

was not always necessary in cases where a faculty member would take a student on. However, this participant indicated that these cases were uncommon and that there was “usually consensus”. Overall, all participants indicated collaborative decision-making during the admissions process.

Rubrics, ranking, and subjectivity. While most participants indicated having a rubric for ranking participants, or a ranking system without a rubric, the interpretation and use of these rubrics or ranking systems varied across and within programs. Further, different items were sometimes assigned different weights, and some rubrics were more explicit than others.

Four participants indicated that their program used a rubric of some type to rate applicants. These rubrics used Likert-type scales to rank between 6 and over 20 dimensions including items such as GPA, work/volunteer experience, reference letters, interpersonal skills, self-awareness, commitment, and overall fit. Most were limited to scoring explicit applicant criteria or submissions (e.g., academic background, letters of reference, letter of intent) and did not explicitly rank for nonacademic or personal qualities.

Three participants explained that their rubric or ranking system gave equal weight to all applicant attributes or materials, while one mentioned that the rubric used by his/her program gave double weight to work or volunteer experience. In exploring the ways in which a specific score would be assigned to an applicant submission, most participants indicated that this was subjective. While some dimensions included guided scoring (e.g., a top score for a certain GPA range or degree type), other dimensions (such as for letters

of reference or letter of intent) did not include any guidance for how to determine scores. Paul explained that “how each member ranks those and what you take into account, what you look for, I’m not going to pretend it doesn’t vary a bit”.

All participants indicated that their admissions committees ranked applicants, with Emily pointing out the necessity of doing so in order to generate both recommendations for admissions as well as a waiting list. However, coming to these rankings rarely seemed to involve merely or directly using scores obtained from rubrics. Adam’s admissions committee, though using a rubric that generates quantitative scores, does not “go through and rank order scores, although score does have a role”. Similarly, in making admissions decisions in his program, Paul explains that “it’s probably a combination of both [their quantitative score and a holistic decision], but the quantitative rankings...carry a lot of weight. They carry a lot of weight. But...it’s holistic in the sense that we don’t absolutely follow them”.

Emily explained that while her program provides a rubric for appraising applicants, it is “more of a framework to frame our thinking around, you know, what are we looking for in the interview”. Instead, Emily shared that the ranking for each applicant was generated holistically after all materials had been reviewed and interviews were complete.

Lynn explained that some faculty on the admissions committee in her program do not use the rubric at all: “This ranking system is only a guide. Some people have been there that long, they don’t really use it or [regardless of] how long they’ve been in the

faculty, they don't use this to the T. Others will rely heavily on it". Lynn explained that she saw the rubric and ranking system as a helpful way to generate discussion:

[The rubric is] just a guiding point, and what we generally find is a point for discussion so that, you know, if a student comes across our plate, I may have ranked him one way and someone else has ranked them another way. We have discussion around what they saw in that particular application that appealed to them, what they saw that didn't, and then it provides the basis for discussion.

Finally, John shared that his own admissions committee reviews files and engages in interviews before collaboratively deciding on ratings for each applicant. He stipulated that "there's a lot of subjectivity in the rating. So, it's not a formal 'did they meet this criteria, this criteria, this criteria'. We may spend time discussing a certain applicant and just trying to get everybody's feel for that applicant...before we give them a rating".

Specific criteria reflections. Some insight was generated regarding specific admissions considerations, such as how programs might interpret or use letters of intent, references, degree type, or course background. While these applicant materials appear to be widely used, they are not without complication or even contention.

For example, the use of degree type or completed coursework was viewed variably by different participants. Some indicated that their programs preferred specific types of degrees (e.g., psychology or education) while others, like Mark's, were more general, desiring a social science degree: "I know some programs articulate psychology. We're not of that mind". Emily explained that admitting students with diverse backgrounds "was bringing the richness of this cross-section of humanity into the

program”. She also guessed that someone without a psychology degree would not, in her opinion, “fair better academically and/or professionally than someone without”.

Concerning applicant statements of intent or interest, Lynn acknowledged that these documents are written idiosyncratically and that they “may be written by other people”. In addition to her acknowledgement that the ranking or interpretation of these statements are very subjective, she explained how she herself assess them. Lynn said that she looks at how they are written (grammatically speaking), what the letters show about “what [applicants] bring to the program and why they want to do it” as well as their “awareness of what the degree is about and how they could use it”. In this, she acknowledged her own way of using the statement of intent in her admissions decisions. Adam, while indicating a similar approach, also found that he could often assess self-reflective abilities and other personal qualities in the letter of intent. On the other hand, Emily, like Lynn, indicated the sometimes-problematic nature of letters of intent being written in “very idiosyncratic ways across candidates” and thus indicated seeing them as less reliable for the assessment of nonacademic qualities.

Letters of reference as a source of applicant data highlighted a tension in admissions reviews between an inclusionary and exclusionary focus. Paul explained that because “in Canada right now the tradition is very strong letters of reference... anyone who says anything negative at all, it’s going to really stand out, because people don’t generally do that”. Lynn echoed a similar sentiment explaining that “the references can be really general, really vague” and that often what stands out to her is anything alarming. In this sense, she explained that a “bigger trigger” is something negative rather

than something positive. Mark also described his own program's process as focusing on bringing applicants into the program instead of on rejecting them, explaining that "when you look at counsellor education and if you've done a literature review on interviews and that sort of thing, you will know that...in many cases...your ability to be able to reject somebody is higher priority or more dominant". These three participants highlighted the tension between focusing on red flags (or reasons to reject a candidate) and searching for positive traits to prove worthiness for admission.

Finally, in discussing the diversity in admissions requirements, Mark shared that despite the variation in admissions protocols, he has "never really...felt that other programs weren't doing a good job". He explained that while some programs require certificate courses or a heavy focus on psychology in one's undergraduate degree, his program puts the focus elsewhere:

Some programs like ours...don't really put a high value on [degrees or prerequisite courses], so these people might criticize ours and we would look at theirs and say, eh, you know counsellors have a variety of skills, knowledge, and experiences that they can access other than psychology...so we don't really go with that dominant type of view. So, we could criticize it, but I simply look at it and acknowledge it, and I think the diversity is probably a good thing for the profession.

Competition. Four participants explicitly mentioned the competitiveness of their programs in terms of gaining admission. Emily explained that "it's a really competitive pool" and "such a competitive process" because of the "limited admissions in terms of

numbers”. Mark also described his program as competitive, explaining that “it’s like splitting hairs sometimes” due to how many qualified people come forward.

Paul also acknowledged that his program is competitive, explaining that “your chances of getting in here unless you’re getting pretty close to straight [perfect scores on the rubric] is not that high because we just have too many applicants”. However, he shared that “it sort of breaks everyone’s heart that we get so many applications and we take so few people....There are probably a lot of really good psychologists in the people that are being rejected, but you know, we can only accept so many”.

Gatekeeping. Gatekeeping and the gatekeeping imperative were both discussed in detail in many of the research interviews, sometimes with participants bringing it up themselves. Gatekeeping, as touched upon in Chapter 1, refers to the various stages (or gates) at which membership to the profession is monitored or restricted. Gatekeeping is intended to protect the integrity of the profession as well as the interests of the public served by professional members (Homrich, 2009). In the CCPA (2007) and CPA (2000) codes of ethics, gatekeeping is an ethical imperative belonging, in part, to graduate schools.

Mark explained gatekeeping as “[making] sure that the people that you’re letting in to the program are the people you feel are best for the profession and keeping out those that you think really are not”. He added that “the community relies upon...some gatekeeping duties of the professional programs”. Emily herself was vocal about gatekeeping as an ethical imperative, explaining that she looks at applicants “as potential professionals in the field” and that assessing applicants in this way basically “underscores

the real crucial nature of gatekeeping as an ethical imperative for this profession”. She contrasted this with admissions to programs of a more strictly academic nature.

Relatedly, Lynn shared that “[their] counselling program has one of the more in-depth application review processes out of all our master’s programs here, within this faculty, because of the type of program it is and the intensity of the program....There’s a lot more attention given to it”.

As for the role of gatekeeping, Emily claimed that “the gatekeeping role for sure is centered around the protection of the public”. She later expanded upon this:

It’s really about meeting [the student’s] needs...but also making sure that it’s going to meet the needs of the people on the receiving end down the road...just making sure that we’re getting a good fit so we’re not wasting the applicant’s time and that we’re not putting potential future clients in harm’s way.

Similarly, Adam indicated that gatekeeping served not only as a protection of future clients, but for students as well. In this, he mentioned protecting both the students looking to commit to a program that might not be a good fit and the other students in the program who might be negatively impacted by the presence of a poorly-matched student.

To underscore that Emily saw gatekeeping as a part of the admissions process, she shared that, to her, “it’s that real sense of spending time, before you bring them into the program. Because...ultimately, or ideally, gatekeeping is happening from the very beginning”. Likewise, Mark explained that “there are various gatekeepers to the profession and the first one is this right here [the admissions interview], so we try to pull

in people where, you know, we have fairly strong and positive impressions of who they are as...people.”

Both Emily and Mark believed that it was important to gatekeep early since it became harder or more problematic as time went on. Emily explained that “once [students are] in the program, the gatekeeping piece is challenging because the person can be academically successful but there can be other interpersonal style issues arising”. Mark suggested that “the most expensive thing that [the professional organizations] have to go through are ethical complaints and when those ethical complaints go to court, they burn up a lot of money”. He added that “professions don’t want ethical complaints, so you really need competent people coming into the profession”.

Adding a unique voice on this topic, another participant explained,

In terms of gatekeeping, I don’t see us gatekeeping for CPA or CCPA. We are not...a CCPA-accredited institution. Students are not guaranteed CCPA registration from our program. We are our own entity and the gatekeeping has to do more with...a moral and an ethical responsibility for ourselves in terms of who we bring through.

This participant added that they did not “think that CPA and CCPA would focus so much on who we let in but what it is they get when they come out and whether or not they fit their standards”. This participant reiterated that they did not think the CCPA cared “what [students] came into our program with; they want to know what skills they have when they’re applying [for certification] and what they’ve got through our program”. Thus,

they said, “I don’t know if the gatekeeping at the beginning is more about them or more about us”.

Gateslipping. This subtheme addresses the rates of gateslipping that participants estimated in their own programs. As discussed in Chapter 1, gateslipping refers to instances where candidates are permitted into the profession (or into professional degrees as a part of their journey into the profession) despite being unfit. In this sense, the gate has failed to sufficiently protect the profession, the public, and the student. The other side of this matter is the success that participants attested to, including their confidence about their screening processes.

Emily shared that

we feel pretty good about the sort of predictive validity of the process that we have right now in that when we’ve felt really good about people that have been admitted, on the whole they’ve done really well in the program. When we’ve had some concerns, those tend to be borne out.

When Emily’s admissions committee has been concerned about an applicant, she indicated that those students have often required remedial work or other support in the program.

Mark also expressed confidence in his institution’s approach:

we really think we do a great job in really selecting strong people for the program, and of course that depends on the year, because some years you don’t get all strong applications, but I think for the most part we have a good screening process.

Paul echoed these sentiments, saying, “on the whole, I’m quite satisfied with the students that we bring in. I think the vast majority of them turn out to be fine psychologists”.

When asked about the perceived success rate of the screening process employed in his program, John estimated it as “very high”. Despite this general confidence, all participants indicated that their screening processes were limited in some way, leading to gateslipping.

Mark acknowledged that sometimes mistakes are made, and that “you reject people who should’ve been in, and sometimes you accept people who shouldn’t have been in....It works both ways”. Lynn herself said that “there have been...not a lot, but there have been students who have gotten through that in hindsight...might not have been good candidates”.

In this vein, Adam added that

once in a while we’ve missed where people have been likely less forthcoming in the information we get. So, we end up with people who are very good academically but then struggle when it comes to engaging in the interactive aspects of our program, and we’ve had one or two midway through saying, ‘I’m really realizing that I don’t want to be a counsellor; I don’t like people that much.’

Paul took a somewhat different approach to the limits of screening, explaining that occasionally we make mistakes or some students are certainly stronger than others, but that’s life....Some people are just better than others, but on the whole...I think [our students] are pretty good....We’re not finding that our process is really messing us up or messing our program up.

John explained that

we have what we call projects...students who become like special projects....Our admissions is 25 students a year and out of those maybe one or two a year...need remedial work and are a lot of work, and out of those...50% wash out and 50%...become inspiring success stories.

Emily estimated the success rate at her institution as “probably 90%, and then [for] that other 10%, there could be anywhere from some low-level concerns to grave concerns”. She estimated that there had been “ten or fewer” candidates in the past six years who did not seem appropriate for the profession. In estimating the rate of gateslipping at her own institution, Lynn said she thought there were “four or five students that were questionable in...six years, so it could be on average one student a year...one student every couple years that are questionable”.

When asked if she felt that her program was fulfilling the gatekeeping imperative, Emily said, “Partially,” adding that “sometimes we are admitting with some red flags raised or some concerns arising and...in hindsight, we might say if we had not admitted, that might have been a better choice.”

John added some unique insight while discussing a couple of students who had “slipped by some how” in the past year and then required remediation. He explained that despite the heavy and demanding workload of remediation, “looking at [those students] now...I’m so glad that we stuck with them because they are just fine people, fine counsellors, and they’ve made it – and so I would’ve hated to not have had them in the program, looking back on it”.

Constraints to gatekeeping. Often in conjunction with gateslipping, many participants mentioned factors that made their screening processes more difficult. Some also discussed outside influences that either complicated admissions or were simply added considerations at the time of admission. Often these factors came down to economics, but participants also mentioned legal concerns and administrative misunderstanding.

Several participants mentioned worries about litigiousness. In discussing his program's effort to amply gatekeep, John explained,

We're kind of stuck. If we allow a student into the program...we are obligated to train them to be a professional counsellor...but we need to protect the profession, but if we kick them out of the program, they can sue us. So...we really have to dance around that.

Two other participants brought up legal concerns several times during the interview, highlighting an awareness of the role that litigiousness is playing in their admissions processes and in the profession in general. Sometimes this involved invoking the "need to seek legal opinion" about making changes to admissions, and other times it merely included the mention of a professional world increasingly complicated by legal issues. Paul himself explained that using overly subjective dimensions during admissions would lead to lawsuits, insisting that "you'd be sued".

In a category that seemed chiefly to do with neoliberalism, there was regular mention of economic pressures both institutionally and on the part of applicants. For instance, in discussing ideal and problematic candidates, Lynn explained that she

had people write in their rationale...that they're applying to the program because...they heard there were jobs in this area. Well, that to me is not a good rationale for doing the program....In order to do this kind of work, you have to be committed to it and you have to want to do it more than just because it's a job and there might be jobs in this area.

Similarly, in a discussion about his desire for a student to be committed to the profession, Mark noted an issue with "people who simply want an upgrade in their teaching license".

Emily also referred to this trend, estimating that around 25% of applicants seek admission because of the "economic times", explaining that, "we've got students who've graduated from programs and are saying,... 'I can't get into the teaching field. There's just no openings so I need something else'. So, they're looking at it from a more pragmatic perspective".

Following on from his earlier point about gateslipping in his program, Mark explained that when the admissions committee has admitted students despite having concerns about their appropriateness as candidates, this has significantly been because of a neoliberal trend that he noted in education:

Every university in the country has a bottom line 'bums-in-seats', and so...there's always a constant tension...between choosing the appropriate people for your program and those people who qualify and...rejecting possible candidates and falling below the acceptable numbers by the university, because they want a full complement of people. And, as a result of that, sometimes we are forced to kind of go into the bottom of a waitlist where we should not have had to go or even to

people that we would've rejected and would not waitlist, but because they minimally qualified...we would have to bring them in. And... that's the kind of neoliberal, bums-in-seats, you know, bottom-line dollar that universities have and we're always in tension with that.

Emily echoed this sentiment, explaining that "given the financial constraints faced by universities, sometimes there is a temptation to say, well, if someone meets the academic qualifications, you should admit them". She explained that when students get admitted despite red flags it is generally because of "administrative demands to...have a full cohort, so it's a financial [reason]".

Though taking a different angle, Paul also acknowledged at least part of the neoliberal milieu, considering his mention of intense workloads and the unlikelihood of change coming without a motivating crisis:

I'm sure that if we struck a committee of...3 or 4 of us to... spend...a lot of time over the next year kind of critically analyzing [the admissions process], we might be able to come up with some solid ways to tweak it or improve it, but like a lot of things in life, we're all crazy crazy overworked and busy and...because there are no red flags, there's no crisis....It's sort of one of those things we muddle along with the system we have and...it probably won't change until there's a crisis or...we're presented with really good evidence that there's a better way to do it, and, I mean, I think we're all open to the possibility that that might happen.

Finally, Emily acknowledged the administrative pressures that can affect the admissions process:

I think what we would ask for is...enhanced understanding on the part of administration outside of the program around the importance of the interview and the importance of the gatekeeping role. Because we've got administrators in the school of [education] and at the university level who are not professional counsellors, they're not really aware of...the ethical concerns...the moral concerns around admitting people who, you know,...their work with clients could lead to...troublesome or even disastrous outcomes.

She also noted that "sometimes there's not an awareness on the part of people outside of the counselling profession around the need for more than good academic grades and good letters of reference".

Theme 2: The Role of the Committee and its Members

Participants regularly discussed their own role in the admissions process as well as the role of committee. This theme brings together those discussions under four subthemes: *Power and Fairness*, *Checks and Balances*, *Experience*, and *Limits of Knowledge*. Generally, these subthemes address how participants felt about the power they have in the admissions process, the duty they have to be fair, and the methods for ensuring such fairness. Furthermore, some participants referred to the role that their experience plays in lending credibility to the admissions process. These topics are discussed in the subthemes below.

Power and fairness. In acknowledging his power, Mark explained that "it never leaves our thinking that...we're dealing with people's lives...that some of their future is in this process. So, making sure that we do it ethically is really really

important...ethically and compassionately”. While acknowledging that the process would never be completely fair, John was aware of the power that the committee had: “I think it’s never going to be 100% fair...and that bothers me. Some that we turn away, I think if we make a mistake, were we too subjective or...did we apply rigour? Or did we just...not sleep well last night?”.

Lynn echoed the sentiments of some of the others when she suggested that “we need to be very careful that we are being fair in what we do”. Paul explained that

you have to balance a lot of people’s interests and rights to try to come up with the process that is serving the program, that is serving the public, but that’s also...serving the applicants in a fair way and that eventually will be serving the clients.

In exploring the notion of being fair, Paul touched on the idea that he needed to be fair to applicants who had jumped through all of the typical and expected hoops in order to prepare for graduate school. He also explained that “to be fair and transparent you have to use reasonably objective criteria and you have to use them in a fair balanced way”.

Checks and balances. In this subtheme, all applicants touched upon how they or their program tried to make the screening process fair, generally through checks and balances. I came to think of these as representing the technical concepts of triangulation and inter-rater reliability, since most checks and balances fell in one of these two categories. In the sense of triangulation, multiple sources were used to come to robust conclusions about applicants. In terms of inter-rater reliability, multiple “raters” were

employed in the assessment of applicants to control for basic subjectivity. These two checks and balances will be explored in turn.

Emily explained how the checks and balances worked at her institution in this way:

In a sense, we are assessing throughout the course of the file review and the interview itself and then we're consulting with each other around perceptions that we came away with following the interview. So, it's about sort of a holistic assessment and multiple sources of information....about, you know, the letters of reference that are coming from others, the statement of intent that's coming from the individual, but also that face-to-face with the individual.

Paul also referred to a similar kind of triangulation when he described his program's attempt to be well-rounded:

We try to look for not only really good researchers and strong academics and people that come with strong references and good letters of intent, but we look at their experience working with people, and helping people, so I mean, we try for a fairly rounded approach.

Finally, Mark and John both described screening processes that used what could be described as "mixed-methods". Mark said that "it usually is a mixture of all of it—the procedures and processes that we have in place". John himself added that when there is disagreement or questions about an applicant, the committee will "look at the data and what people are saying" and then "go back to the whole file and reread through things...to check our perceptions".

Regarding the use of multiple raters to ensure better judgment of applicants, all participants described having at least two people review each file or conduct each interview. Adding to this, participants described the use of collaborative dialogue and other checks and balances to ensure that multiple committee members were involved in admissions assessments and decisions. John said, “With our interviews, there’s [multiple] faculty who interview [all] applicants and so we...will compare notes,...so it doesn’t fall all to one person”. Mark also described a variety of checks and balances, explaining that “we are really careful about that impressionistic approach mainly because it...can be idiosyncratic as well, so that’s why we have more than one person interviewing”.

Participants also discussed the levelling process of collaboration and debate. Lynn explained that

even though there is an individual and a subjective purpose [in the first stage of screening], what happens then is that the group as a whole, because there’s so many people involved in that process,...it evens out in the end.

She added that this was possible because “there’s a lot of discussion around [who will be admitted]”. Mark described having some “counterpoint” and disagreement among interviewers and thus finding the conversation afterward very important, and Adam described working first through applicants that everyone could agree on and then to applicants without consensus until arriving at the list of candidates selected for that year. Similarly, Emily described the process as reflective, where at most stages there was time to make “anecdotal comments” and to discuss impressions of the applicants.

Finally, Mark explained that “one of the most vital components of the process is the dialogue that you have collegially”. He added that in terms of checks and balances, “it isn’t so much of an internal kind of decision making model...even in accepting people”. He elaborated, saying,

we even follow kind of a relational decision-making model where we not only interview but we also talk to each other once the interview is over and that is immediately following the interview, but it’s also following all of the interviews at the end of the day, and it’s also at the end of the process when we have all the files together.

Though not all participants indicated such extensive collaboration, all specified collaboration as a central part of the decision-making process.

Experience. This subtheme gathers instances where participants referred to their experience as a tool for making sound judgments. In these cases, their experience was generally indicated as a check on the power that they held as a screening committee.

Mark explained that his admissions committee has “very seasoned counsellor educators [and] a lot of experience... so our judgments, I think, over the years have enabled us to...select out what we consider to be some pretty top notch people”. He added that “when you’re teaching and interviewing and practicing yourself and you’re immersed in the profession of counsellors,...you have a fair sense of who would be successful within the profession and who wouldn’t be”. Furthermore, Mark mentioned that one applicant who had applied quite a few times and finally gained admission had

“conferred that our judgments of him [were] pretty good,” saying that “he admitted...that [he] was not ready” but kept applying anyway.

Emily agreed that the experience of serving on the admissions committee had meant that the committee had become “pretty consistent” in discerning between applicants. John added that part of the interview process was made robust because, “[applicants] can’t fake it very well in front of three professional counsellors who are interviewing [them]”.

Limits of knowledge. Despite the checks and balances, many participants acknowledged that they were ultimately limited in their ability to judge applicants with complete accuracy. Paul explained that “however much you know an applicant...all you have is the evidence before you, which is always going to be superficial in relation to who they really are as people,...so you do the best you can with the limited information you have”. Mark also noted that in the file and the interview, “[the committee doesn’t] get everything”.

Adam acknowledged that even with an interview, the time with the applicant would still be “a short period, so we [wouldn’t] get to see much of what they’re like in the long term”. Emily also shared this impression, saying that the interview “gives us a snapshot and it gives nothing more than a snapshot” and that “it’s not a fail-safe method”.

Theme 3: Assessing Applicants

This theme addresses participant contributions regarding the assessment of applicants. While the first two themes in this overarching category of *Admissions in Counselling* involved both the admissions process in general as well as the role of the

committee and its members, this theme is an aggregate of the ways that participants described thinking about or assessing the applicants specifically. This theme is broken into four subthemes: *Holism*, *Extrapolation*, *Paper versus Person*, and *Academics “versus” Personal Qualities*.

Holism. This first subtheme brings together common discussions about judging candidates holistically. In this, participants either explicitly indicated the holistic model used in their program or they referred in some way to seeing a person as a whole. In large part, this subtheme highlights the language that was so commonly used around assessing applicants that indicated holistic thinking.

Lynn explained that assessing applicants involved “[looking] at the whole individual and what they bring to the program”. When asked about the main inclusion or exclusion criteria used in her program’s admissions, Lynn felt that this was a hard question to answer, since the committee looks for well-rounded students, basing their judgments on “a feel for [an] overall package of whoever’s in front of us”. She elaborated:

We might see someone whose grades are really high but they lack experience, someone who has moderate grades but has awesome experience, so I think it’s weighing out all those factors all together that kind of helps target who that individual might be.

Similarly, Emily indicated a “sort of holistic assessment of individuals” and that “beyond the [initial rule in/rule out stage], it’s more of...an overall assessment of all of those attributes, and I’m not sure that we would be able to say that any of those is

weighted more heavily than another”. Adam referenced the “holistic sense of good fit” in assessing applicants, John also indicated using holistic rankings, and Mark said that his committee “[leans] towards people who...are a fit for the program”.

Paul, while suggesting that his program assessed applicants both quantitatively and holistically, added that he does not think about applicant qualities “atomistically”. He said, “I don’t tend to think, well how are they in this category, how are they...I’m trying to form an overall picture of a person...I want to get a sense of somebody”.

This language of a holistic “sense” was extremely common across all interviews. Participants described wanting “a sense of [applicants] as people”, a sense of fit with the program, a “sense of them as a human being”, and so on. Synonymous or similar language was also consistently used. Participants talked about how they “experienced” applicants, how applicants were “coming across”, impressions of candidates, what applicants were “radiating when...in the room”, and “building a picture” of applicants. In these ways, participants used language indicating something overarching, intangible, or felt. Mark explained, “we get impressions of people based upon all of the things that they are saying. So, it’s not just factual, it’s also impressionistic”. This kind of language was present across participants, regardless of the use of interviews during the screening process.

Extrapolation. This subtheme analyzes the common tendency of participants to draw indirect conclusions from applicant data. In this sense, participants were extrapolating from the data before them to make admissions decisions. Often, participants discussed information that they gathered about applicants as *markers* for certain qualities

or attributes. This sense of using markers was often merely implied, while at other times it was explicit.

Adam indicated that his committee is informally “deriving information from...sources”, such as letters of intent, references, or work and volunteer experience”. Similarly, Mark said that “we can glean from the [letter of intent] quite a lot of things”. Mark also discussed a type of extrapolation while reflecting on how some people in the past had asked applicants what books they were reading. He explained that this was “because some people favor people who are literate, and who read, and they can interpret from what people are reading the kind of students coming in”. While he said that they had moved away from these kinds of idiosyncratic interview questions, his commentary represented an example of committee members drawing indirect conclusions from what is explicitly shared during screening.

In fact, Mark explained that through interviews, his committee is “pulling threads...to get impressions of the individual”, adding that “you don’t get all of that [detailed sense of a person] in interviews...but...it might be a marker”. Paul admitted that “there’s always an element, I think, unavoidably, of reading between the lines” and that “you look for what evidence you can”.

Extrapolation was also commonly used when evaluating an applicant’s work or volunteer experience. Participants discussed various prerequisites in this category, or a preference for certain types of experience, presumably as markers for stronger candidates. For instance, Emily said that she is “looking for things that are really work experience where the nature of the work is highly focused on interpersonal skills”. Paul

thought work with youth groups, church groups, or work as a camp counsellor gave “the impression that this is a caring, generous person”. He explained that

somebody who’s worked 5 years at a summer camp when they’re a teenager...that looks really good to me because...usually you’re not making much money at a summer camp. You’re there because you like working with kids and you want to help them....It’s even better if it’s a camp for poor kids or underprivileged kids in some way...or it could be volunteering in a hospital.

Other forms of extrapolation were present as well. For instance, Emily specified that “it’s not that we’re saying you must look like this when you leave the program...but we want to anticipate, how do I think this person would function in the various practicum settings that we have?” Finally, Paul highlighted the necessity of extrapolation, saying that “until you get to know them as grad students, you’re getting hints of it more than, like, you really know. You’re getting a sense that somebody has these things, but, I mean, what does that mean, right?”

Participants also regularly indicated the inclination or need to project into the future with applicants. In other words, they would use information from applicant files or interviews to make inferences about how individuals might function as future professionals. This was likely the most explicit form of extrapolation in the data. John said that his committee considers if “this [is] a person who we could see being a counsellor”, explaining that through the interview, “it’s kind of like we have a feel that this person would be effective in a... counselling room, you know, helping situation”.

Emily was even more specific, assessing applicants to see if they can display “healthy levels of self-disclosure in an interview situation, which likely will translate into the way that they might be working with clients”. She wondered, “Can they bring themselves into the room and do they know how to use the self effectively in an interview, which is somewhat analogous to a counselling session?”

Mark indicated that his committee wants to know how a person will “contribute to the profession” once leaving the program. He noted that the committee, in seeking impressions about applicants “moving into a counselling-type relationship with people”, had to “project that into the future [themselves]”. Emily concurred that “we...need to look at the nature of the person and what they would be bringing into future counselling encounters”.

Paper versus person. Another common subtheme in the category of assessing applicants concerned how applicants might present in person versus on paper. In these cases, there was common acknowledgment that an applicant might not be fully or truthfully represented in their paper application.

For instance, John shared,

I can think of many cases where we had applicants who looked fantastic on paper but...as soon as we start interviewing them and looking at their personal qualities...we ran. And I can think of others who did not look as strong on paper and who are now excellent counsellors.

Lynn also expressed some reservations about how reliable a paper application is with the awareness that the statement of intent, for example, can be written by someone else.

Mark insisted that the difference between paper and in-person applications was significant:

We have foreign students, as well, who look great on paper. We always Skype those people or do a telephone interview because we need to know if they can be articulate and be able to speak the language....And the degree of self-awareness and life experiences become more visible in an interview as well.

Emily also noted the tension between applicants on paper and in person, saying, “what we are really trying to get at are some of those qualities or attributes of the applicants, to get a sense of beyond what they present on paper, in terms of academic transcripts and their statement of intent and their letters of reference”. Emily reported that

How people present on paper can be exceedingly different from how they present in person, and so somebody might look exceptional on paper and often they do...but then in person there’s a sense that...there may be other career paths that would be both more fulfilling and also yield better outcomes for clients....It’s not enough just to look at grades or to look at statement of intents because...so very often who we see in the flesh is quite different from...who we read on paper.

Finally, John acknowledged several times that paper applications failed to highlight certain significant applicant details, explaining that serious red flags “did not come out...in [their] GPA, did not come out of the references, anything like that”. John, like Lynn, also acknowledged that things can be faked on paper much more easily than in person, adding that “there’s a quantitative portion [to the screening] and that’s very important, but the nuances...that has to be qualitative”.

Academics “versus” personal qualities. Finally, a common subtheme regarding the assessment of applicants was the discussion of academic qualities “versus” personal qualities. While these categories were often discussed as separate, they are arguably nondichotomous.

Adam explained that his admissions committee was looking for two things. First “some academic assurance” or, in other words, “some assurance that you’re going to be able to work at a master’s level”. Second, “some assurance...as to their interpersonal skills”. He noted that they

will choose to go away from somebody who has a higher score but that we feel is something of a wild card in one of those areas. So, there have been situations where somebody had all kinds of great references [and] interpersonal experiences, but their background, academically, suggests that this is going to be a really tough road for them to hoe. And then there are other people that...who come in with top notch academics but we’re concerned about the interpersonal skills and so we’ll shy away from them in those areas.

Similarly, Emily consistently emphasized the importance of “interpersonal competence” in applicants, suggesting that “when we’re looking at people who are our future teachers and our future mental health professionals, there’s got to be more than just that academic piece”.

John also noted the balance between academics and other personal qualities, indicating that “if a person is...rigid and cold...it doesn’t matter how good their GPA is; they’re not going to make a good impression on us”. John explained that “character

enters into it” and that applicants with perfect GPAs who have good references who come in and cannot relate to people are turned away. On the other hand, he also said that they would not tend to go below their GPA cut-off, except rarely if “the references were glowing” and “we sensed in them that this is a person who could be a...counsellor”.

Paul referred to a similar balancing of academics and personal qualities, though he admitted academics “tend to dominate”:

We try to look for not only really good researchers and strong academics and people that come with strong references and good letters of intent, but we look at their experience of working with people, and helping people, and so...we try for a fairly rounded approach...but...I can't lie, I mean, I know that in practice, it probably falls a little disproportionately on their academic strength.

Paul also explained that while he loves when people seem to have promising or ideal personal qualities, it is nonessential, does not describe all of the students in his program, and that “you can get in here without having them”. He added that evidence of desirable personal qualities is more likely to simply give an applicant a slight edge over someone else who is equally matched in academics, rather than independently or even significantly gaining them admission.

Paul added other insight, explaining

I can't look into somebody's soul and know whether or not they have the capacity for wisdom and how much growth potential they have in them or, you know, how psychologically minded they are. I mean,...I know that that makes for a great counsellor and I love it if I see evidence of it, but...lots of people get admitted to

counselling because they have really really high marks and...they have really good letters of intent and strong letters of recommendation and they've done some work with people and so they have, sort of, the essentials. And, I don't always know whether they have all of these other wonderful things, but I just love it if I see that they do.

Concluding Thoughts

This chapter has covered the first results category generated from my research data. This category of *Admissions in Counselling*, contained three themes. The first theme analyzed data from the interviews corresponding to admissions processes in terms of general and evolving protocol, the specific criteria used, and the competitiveness of counselling admissions. It also covered participant reflections on gatekeeping and gateslipping, as well as constraints to the gatekeeping process.

The second theme looked at the participant's own roles on their admissions committees, including how committees check and balance the power that they hold, and the limitations that they face during the screening process. This theme also discussed the experience that participants indicated bringing to admissions decisions.

The last theme in this category presented common discussions regarding how applicants are assessed during admissions. This addressed the holism often present in admissions decisions, as well as the practice of extrapolating from application data. Finally, this theme explored the differences between seeing applicants on paper versus in person, and the tension between academic and personal qualities in applicants.

Chapter 5: Results – Counsellor Personal Qualities and Admissions

This results chapter covers the second category of analysis: *Counsellor Personal Qualities and Admissions*. It contains three themes. The first theme, *Personal Qualities Important to Counsellors*, presents an analysis of the personal qualities that participants deemed important to the practice of counselling insofar as they believed that counsellors should possess or embody them. This theme contains several subthemes of personal qualities including an intrapersonal skills cluster, an interpersonal skills cluster, and two other more specific skill clusters.

The second theme in this category, *Assessment of Personal Qualities during Admissions*, contains four subthemes. The first subtheme covers how personal qualities were indicated to currently be assessed during admissions. The subsequent subthemes explore participant reflections on the importance of assessing for personal qualities, issues in doing these sorts of assessments, and thoughts about interviews and other approaches to assessment.

The final theme in this category, *General Considerations for Personal Qualities and Graduate School*, presents an analysis of other salient topics that arose during discussions about personal qualities in admissions and graduate school. Ultimately, when discussing the qualities deemed important for counsellors to possess, there were implications for the practice of counselling, for graduate school training, and for admissions reviews as well. In this sense, the topic did not limit itself to admissions since this process is somewhat inextricable from the topic of graduate training and later counselling practice. The three subthemes in this area cover topics such as training

candidates in personal quality areas, the growth orientation in counselling psychology, and the idea of the self of the counsellor as the foundation of counselling practice.

To clarify, the following table highlights the current position in the analysis:

Table 5.1

Thematic Organization of Chapter 5

<p>Chapter 5: Counsellor Personal Qualities and Admissions</p> <p>Theme 1: Personal Qualities Important to Counsellors</p> <p>Theme 2: Assessment of Personal Qualities during Admissions</p> <p>Theme 3: General Considerations for Personal Qualities and Graduate School</p>
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A description of the themes and subthemes can be found in Appendix D.

Theme 1: Personal Qualities Important to Counsellors

This first thematic area focuses on the qualities that participants deemed important for counsellors to possess. During each interview, participants were asked, in turn, to list, define, and explore the qualities that they considered most important for a counsellor to have to successfully practice counselling. In addition to the answers provided at that time, participants frequently discussed applicant personal qualities that they sought out during the admissions process. In other words, participants presented indirect answers to the question of what personal qualities were important to the practice of counselling at other times during the interview, and those offerings were considered during analysis along with the direct answers. This was generally the case unless a participant indicated qualities that they thought were merely important to graduate school and not to one's career as a counsellor or psychologist.

In the end, the list of qualities generated from these six participants was long and complex. Many qualities overlapped with other qualities, many were defined variably, and many were defined as another participant might define a different quality altogether.

I have analysed these qualities and come up with four representative subthemes. These subthemes contain a variety of qualities that, when described by the participants, could be seen to rest upon one coherent foundation or at least to be related in some significant way. The four subthemes that I identified are as follows: (1) *Intrapersonal Skills*, (2) *Life Experience and Human Understanding*, (3) *Interpersonal Skills*, and (4) *Scholarly Abilities*. These subthemes are complex and are explained and analyzed in detail below.

Intrapersonal skills. Intrapersonal skills involve various self-management skills, or skills that individuals employ internally, including emotional regulation. In organizing the various personal qualities that arose during my research interviews, I clustered together the qualities that seemed to relate most clearly to internal self-management traits or skills. Though I recognized that these traits involved interactions with the environment and that they would ultimately underscore many interpersonal skills, I delineated them by focusing on how internal they were as processes and how self-standing they could be. In other words, if they could be seen to involve a person's own inner processes and if they were not basically social, then I saw them as part of the intrapersonal cluster. In the end, I organized the various intrapersonal skills data into five areas used to describe the ideal counsellor: (1) *self-aware and self-engaged*, (2) *growth-oriented*, (3) *flexible/open-minded*, (4) *professionally dedicated and aware*, and (5) *conscientious*. These will each be explored below.

Self-aware and self-engaged. This first characteristic of intrapersonal skills is perhaps the most complex in that a few overlapping qualities are involved. First, participants described the importance of self-awareness and self-reflection. This was

described both in the sense of (a) an active and ongoing awareness and reflection, and (b) an accurate sense of self including awareness of biases, strengths, and so on. Finally, participants described self-engagement in the sense of being self-developed, mature, or healthy.

All but one participant mentioned the need to be self-aware and self-reflective, and they generally mentioned it repeatedly. Mark connected self-awareness to engaging in “reflective practices” and having a “depth of thinking”. Emily and Paul both referred to the importance of being psychologically minded which served as an umbrella term for multiple qualities, some of which were thinking about the self and engaging in self-reflection. Emily described a self-reflective capacity as involving people “reflecting on who they are”. She also talked about the need for insight, explaining that “if we’re really not aware of what’s going on inside of us, then we’re going to miss really important signals in our counselling work” such as “counter-transference or...being triggered by someone else’s presenting issues”. Finally, Emily argued for “self-attunement” or a “curiosity about the self, [and] comfort in exploring the self, because if we can’t be intimate with the self, then how are we going to be intimate with others”. Adam reflected on self-awareness as a desire to explore oneself and to reflect on things. He saw this as “an ability to really understand [oneself] and be free of all kinds of defense mechanisms”. In all of these ways, participants seemed to be referring to the need to reflect deeply upon one’s own self.

Another common theme that concerned self-awareness was the need for self-knowledge or having a clear sense of self. In this, participants often invoked the need to

be aware of one's own worldview, biases, and so on. Lynn mentioned that when she thinks of self-awareness, she thinks of "someone who has a good awareness of themselves, [and] their own strengths and abilities". Mark thought of this as the ability to "self-assess—to have a good balanced view of [oneself]", while Adam explained that he wanted "[his] students to recognize that they're flawed and they have difficulty". In this, Adam indicated the need for "ongoing self-reflection that leads to me being more and more aware of myself, what things I get hung up on, what biases I have, why I have those biases, all kinds of questions like this". Without this he thought there would be "all kinds of pitfalls that are going to come up and all kinds of things that you're going to be blinded to when you're working with your clients".

Similarly, Emily described looking for applicants who "have a good sense of who they are, their own personal identity", and their "growth areas". She mentioned people ideally having an "appropriate level of confidence" and "healthy sense of self-esteem". Emily also included, knowing one's heritage, culture, values, and biases in this sense of self-identity.

Finally, a common thread through the discussions about self-awareness was the need for ongoing self-development. Paul noted that "we're all neurotic" but that "it's ideal if you're not super high in neuroticism". He added that he believes "it helps enormously if you've had a fair bit of counselling yourself" and that you are "aware of your own hang-ups, foibles, prejudices, and...have worked on them and tried to develop yourself as a person". In the same vein, Emily expressed that a counsellor needs to be "healthy enough to be able to work in a healthy way with clients", noting that "as future

professionals, they really can only lead as far as they've travelled themselves". Mark seemed to be describing similar notions when he talked about wanting candidates who are "prepared personally", adding that he thought people needed to be committed to their own self-growth. In addition to believing that it is important for counsellors to know themselves, Mark also said that he thought a part of this involved being able to "take care of [oneself], emotionally, psychologically, physically...". Emily indicated paying attention to applicants for "how they [cope and] manage stress because both the program and the profession present stressful situations on a regular basis". She related this to self-care, "not just [as] good practice but as an ethical imperative in and of itself".

As a whole, these intrapersonal characteristics relates to a person's ability to know herself, reflect upon herself, and to develop herself.

Growth-oriented. This characteristic includes qualities such as curiosity, commitment to learning, and "teachability". These qualities could be seen as overlapping with, or leading from, the quality of self-growth and self-reflection, but were often brought up as categories all of their own.

John, for example, listed one of his major qualities for the practice of counselling as being humble and teachable, saying that "the best students are the ones who pursue their supervisor wanting to be better". He tied this to being open to challenges and taking risks. Lynn listed "curiosity and desire to learn, to want to know more, [and] to question" as central to the practice of counselling. Like John, she thought this involved modesty in the sense that "the minute you think you know everything is the minute that you should

be really worried”. Lynn explained that counsellors “have to be curious [and] to want to learn more so that they can do their job better”.

Emily, too, chose intellectual curiosity as important to the practice of counselling. She tied this to

life long learning...which also is an ethical imperative because we're in a field that is huge in terms of possibilities, you know, the various trajectories associated with it, so just that keenness to keep on learning, to remain abreast of the current literature and research around counselling...[to] be curious about the whole ethical enterprise, about the diversity enterprise, so that they are constantly seeking out and learning and continuing to grow professionally, because it's not just about performance at a particular moment in time, it's about how [you] continue to grow as a professional.

As a whole, these aspects of intrapersonal skills involved a person's orientation and commitment to growing the self and to life long learning.

Flexible/open-minded. Four of the participants listed flexibility or open-mindedness as centrally important to the practice of counselling. In describing these traits, participants consistently discussed cognitive flexibility, perspective-taking, and open-mindedness, often in turn. Thus, the internal and cognitive aspect of these qualities seemed to place them in the intrapersonal cluster. Having said that, open-mindedness also arose consistently as something quite interpersonal, in that it was linked to nonjudgment, acceptance, and warmth. Therefore, open-mindedness will take space in both the inter- and intrapersonal subthemes. Here in the intrapersonal subtheme, this section focuses on

the self-regulating or cognitive aspects of openness or flexibility, rather than the more behavioural and socially enacted aspects of it.

For example, to Adam, flexibility meant being able to “consider alternative ways of viewing [a] situation” and being “flexible in how you see yourself”. He explained that this helped counsellors, in part, because they could seek work more flexibly. Furthermore, he explained that “[thinking] about different ways to manage [situations] and then translating that into how you see your clients’ situations” will, in turn, “[help clients] find flexibility in managing situations”.

Emily also saw open-mindedness and flexibility as very important to the practice of counselling, explaining that she prefers candidates that are “willing to contemplate other perspectives, [since] there’s a lot of requirement in the counselling process for being able to engage in perspective taking and to be able to consider other points of view”. She also included in this the importance of being able to “tolerate ambiguity” which she likened to “flexibility – cognitively, affectively, behaviourally”.

John referred to the importance of openness or what he thought of as ‘post-conventional thinking’ wherein a person can “see beyond their tribe” and beyond the idea that “this is my group of people and we’re right and other people are wrong”. Rather, he expressed preference for the ability to “look at different cultures, different people [and] groups and say...how they construct their reality is valid and I may or may not agree with it but...I can try to understand them and try to support”. John shared, “I don’t think you can be a good counsellor without that”.

Finally, John valued a sense of humor in a counsellor, a quality that no other participant mentioned. I fit this quality roughly into the category of flexibility and open-mindedness, because John believed that humor “allows for creative thinking”, explaining that “when you’re really, really serious, you’re only in the cognitive parts of your brain. Humour accesses the more resourceful parts of your brain”. In this sense, he related the quality to flexibility. However, he also related it to warmth, saying that a sense of humor “makes you more human”, and thus, a sense of humor could go along with the open-mindedness that is more affective and behavioural, allowing for, or being a result of, warmth. Thus, it could also fit into the category of interpersonal skills.

Overall, this category represents the internal or self-regulatory aspects of openness and flexibility wherein a person is able to take perspective and think deeply from other points of view.

Professionally dedicated and aware. Despite not necessarily being an explicit personal quality, most participants discussed the importance of a clear and sound career plan. During discussion, these career-focused qualities typically involved planning, reflection, self-management or other intrapersonal correlates. Therefore, I tentatively include career dedication and awareness as a part of the desired intrapersonal skills subtheme.

Emily connected the “dedication to pursuing this professional path” to having a “foundational knowledge of the profession...a sense of what counsellors do out in the field and what the sort of range of opportunities are”. She associated this with intellectual curiosity and life long learning, and noted the need to “have a passion for the profession

versus seeing it just as a means to an end”. As mentioned previously, Lynn also invoked the need to be committed to work in this field, to have “that desire, [and] that interest in being a counsellor”.

Mark called for “passion” and a “commitment to the profession”. Part of this, as mentioned by both Mark and Emily, was the need to know why an applicant was interested in counselling and why now. Mark also wanted students to have “a fairly clear understanding of their career trajectory” and to “know what the current issues are, [including] the current trends [and] challenges”. This connected to other participants’ desire for applicants to be professionally aware, often as a way of ensuring goodness of fit for their programs. Both Adam and John explained this in terms of applicants seeking designations from programs that could not lead them that way (i.e., clinical psychologist or school psychologist). Adam explained that this “suggests that they haven’t done their homework”.

Finally, Emily sought in applicants a “clarity of career vision”. She thought this could be called “career maturity” and that it would include a sense of “why this profession is going to be a good choice for [the student]”. Overall, then, a passion for counselling (and an awareness and clarity about it) can be seen as a type of planfulness or self-regulation that facilitates a sustainable counselling career.

Conscientious. Finally, though not mentioned by as many participants, conscientiousness and its related traits were thought to play some part in the role of a good counsellor. Included in this cluster are traits of integrity and other characterological correlates to conscientiousness.

Paul chose conscientiousness as one of the central personal qualities important to the practice of counselling. He explained that “you need somebody who’s very disciplined and conscientious...who will actually really want to take care of their clients and is genuinely concerned to do a good job”. He later related this to sound hiring practices in general, saying, “if you’re hiring somebody, the single most important thing is [conscientiousness] and by that they mean diligent, hard-working, responsible, wants to do a really good job, goes above and beyond to do a really good job, somebody who’ll go the extra mile. All of those types of qualities...are wonderful qualities in people who are going to be psychologists”.

Emily was another participant who mentioned these kinds of traits, explaining that she looked for a “promise of ethical fidelity...that’s coming across in terms of honesty and integrity and responsibility and dependability”. Paul also discussed an ideal counsellor as someone “of relatively good character” by which he said he meant “character as in the old-fashioned sense of virtuous” and “somebody of a fair bit of integrity and decency”.

This last aspect of intrapersonal skills thus focuses on a person’s self-management in terms of conscientiousness and integrity.

Life experience and human understanding. This subtheme of personal qualities seemed to bridge a gap in some ways between intrapersonal and interpersonal skills. If intrapersonal skills largely involve self-regulation and other internal skills, and interpersonal skills involve social competence, then life experience and human understanding seem to dabble a bit in both. On the one hand, this category is based on a

sense of reflectiveness, but it is reflection or understanding that involves people and it is a wisdom that seems to be based, according to many of the participants, on life experience. It may be that this cluster is best seen as intrapersonal skills focused outward in that it requires deep reflection and curiosity about human nature and the human condition in general. However, because participants often seemed to tie it to personal experience or a sense of having “lived in the world”, it seemed to involve more than just self-regulation.

In the first place, several participants stressed the importance of life experience in the career of a counsellor. Mark indicated that his admissions committee would “rank people with rich life experiences more favorably” linking it to maturity and other factors that indicate personal preparedness. John also referenced the importance of life experience, but added that his program “had some excellent students who...[entered] the program straight from bachelor’s but...were usually wise beyond their years”. John explained that life experience or wisdom is recognizable in counsellors when “they can hear pain and not be shocked by it”, adding that life experience can help counsellors to “accept life...accept [the client’s] life”, no matter how shocking. He also thought that life experience or wisdom allows a counsellor to be “okay with [herself] enough that [she] can sit back and listen”, and that she does not make the session about herself. Lynn herself referred to a counsellor’s understanding of the human condition as a part of what draws someone to the field.

Paul connected having important experience to his belief that an ideal counsellor has human understanding, or an “ability to understand people, understand life, [and] understand the types of problems people have”. He added that this was partly about being

psychologically minded, “but going beyond that, someone who has just kind of a general awareness of the human dilemma...and the tragic nature of human life and who’s thought a lot about suffering”. He elaborated that this involved a “deep-seated human understanding of how people get into trouble and...what contributes to people being depressed or anxious and that sort of thing and what will help them to grow past that or to grow through that”. He said, “it takes wisdom”.

Interpersonal skills. The third subtheme in the theme of personal qualities important to counsellors is interpersonal skills. Of course, interpersonal skills are defined variably, but I typically thought of them as social skills or skills involving counsellor behaviour aimed at being socially appropriate and relationally facilitative with clients.

When I categorized qualities as intrapersonal or interpersonal, I evaluated if the quality was something that individuals do to manage themselves or to manage their interactions with others. If it fell more solidly into the latter category, I included it here under interpersonal skills. Based on my analysis of the data, I grouped qualities in this interpersonal skills subtheme as follows: (1) *other-aware*, (2) *personable*, (3) *empathic/good listener*, (4) *caring/desire to help*, and (5) *warm/open*. These will be explored in turn.

Other-aware. All participants referred in some way, usually directly, to the importance of being aware of others. For many, this included being aware of one’s impact on others and of social situations in general. Generally speaking, this category best comprises what many participants seemed to mean when discussing what they labelled interpersonal, people, or social skills in general. However, participants also often

termed this cluster of qualities *self-awareness*. I attempted to separate what some participants delineated as an actual awareness of, or reflection upon, *oneself* and one's own inner world (an intrapersonal skill), from self-awareness in the sense of being other-aware or aware of one's own role and impact in social situations. For example, Mark referred to this latter trait as "interpersonal self-awareness" to delineate it from a more internal self-awareness.

When Adam discussed his program's need for assurance of both academic and interpersonal skills, he described applicants with deficits in this latter category as those who "struggle when it comes to engaging in the interactive aspects of our program" or who realize during the program that they do not want to be counsellors, saying they "don't like people that much". Alternatively, when describing her concept of self-awareness in the practice of counselling, Lynn thought that it was important to be "reflective of what is going on" in a counselling session. She also explained this as "tuning in to what's going on and being aware of what's happening in the moment with a client or even reflecting afterwards and realizing that something was off today and I need to look back to that".

Emily suggested the importance of many qualities in this cluster, including having "interpersonal competence" and being "other-aware and other-oriented". She also associated an "awareness of the impact of self on others" as a kind of self-aware self-monitoring, something she said she often talks about as "the little mini-me on my shoulder". Later, Emily discussed the importance of self-awareness in terms of learning "to really effectively...use the self as an instrument of counselling".

Finally, John reiterated the need for social skills, particularly in his program, since they have a “cooperative cohort model” so “if somebody comes in and they’re highly competitive and they’re going to stomp all over their fellow students... [that’s] not a good fit with our program”. He described ascertaining this when an applicant “takes over, dominates, [and] doesn’t acknowledge...others, and is intent on telling us how brilliant he or she is”, showing that he or she “lacks social skills [and] social awareness”.

Personable. This subsection of the interpersonal subtheme generally involves the ability to connect with others. Most participants discussed this, though many in slightly different ways. Both John and Mark referred to the need for applicants to show that they can connect within the interview, or, as John added, to be able to “relate to people”. Emily also echoed this need for connection in her exploration of personal qualities important to the practice of counselling, wanting counsellors who “[come] across as someone who’s really going to connect well and appropriately with others”. Emily said that she wondered during interviews, “can you make yourself present enough, can you use yourself in [your] interview as you might as a therapist?”

Emily chiefly tied this sense of presence to genuineness, or the ability to be “authentic” and to “really bring [oneself] in [to the room]”. She explained that because of the research really underscoring the huge importance of the counselling relationship, of that therapeutic alliance, of that working alliance, if the...counselling client feels that he or she is encountering a sort of a façade or...someone who’s really got some armour around them,...the rapport building

or that relationship building isn't going to be as smooth, so in terms of counselling outcomes, [genuineness] just really enhances them.

Mark argued that “the strongest thing that you have [in counselling] is the relationship” and that the “relationship is based upon who you are”. He tied this to self-awareness and self-monitoring, as well as to the ability “to be present”, “to engage, and to be with people”.

Empathic/good listener. This category of listening skills and empathy is one of the more complex categories due to the variable definitions and explanations offered by participants. However, it still fits well within the interpersonal subtheme since it involves socially-enacted skills or qualities. For some participants, empathy and good listening skills were not necessarily synonymous, and one participant, though invoking the need to be a good listener, was suspicious of empathy as a therapeutic technique. However, I categorized empathy and good listening together since participants regularly discussed them as overlapping.

One of the reasons that I saw these concepts as linked was because of the growing awareness that there seemed to be two major ways of seeing empathy in the interview data. On the one hand, participants discussed it as a skill in the sense that it involved discrete behaviours such as accurate reflection and active listening. On the other hand, some participants described empathy as a more dispositional quality wherein the counsellor places himself in the clients' world, listens with compassion, or “resonates with the client's worldview”.

As a part of empathy as a listening skill, Adam related the necessity of empathy in counselling to what his program wanted from students:

what we want our students to learn is...the ability to listen for what the other person is saying and then be able to, in a tentative way, deliver that back to the client. So, I don't want you to just listen and say, 'Okay, I can relate to what you're saying'. I want you to be able to listen and say, 'I think that this is what you're saying' and give it back to them in your words and then allow them the opportunity to say ['yes' or 'no'].

Adam alternatively described this as an ability to "listen undistractedly", and later described the importance of attending skills such as "body posture" and "eye contact,...trying to structure how much input [you're] providing and how much listening [you're] doing".

Mark acknowledged the need "to suspend yourself...in conversations, [so] that when you're talking to other people, it's not about you, it's about the other person". He described this in another way as well: "I think the more people listen to what people are saying and not to what they think they're saying, or their own interpretation of what it is that other people are talking about...these people make really good counsellors".

The other side of the good listening equation, as brought up by three participants, was the need to practice appropriate sharing or self-disclosure. For example, Adam described a potential problematic applicant as someone who "tended to dominate and wanted to have their opinion come across more than other people". He explained that this was "not conducive to this caring for other people, the empathy for other people, or the

need to listen as part of our own self-reflection”. He clarified that, “my fear is that if you talk a lot you’re either trying to prevent thinking a lot or you’re not listening a whole lot”. Similarly, Emily saw the need for healthy boundaries and an appropriate amount of sharing as important to counselling, while Mark mentioned the need to share appropriately and meaningfully in social situations such as the admissions interview (e.g., not being too superficial, tangential, or too verbose).

However, empathy was often invoked more as a quality of being able to put oneself in the shoes or position of the client. To some, this distinction is perhaps insignificant, but others seemed to see empathy as much more dispositional or sort of spirit-based than to see it as a technique or specific set of listening or reflecting skills. Adam, too, suggested this kind of definition on the heels of his explanation of empathy as a reflective listening skill. Adam explained that having empathy means that you try to “align your way of seeing the phenomena or situation or the client’s world from their perspective” and that “empathy says that I understand to the best of my ability what’s going on for you and I’m able to see things from your perspective”. Likewise, Lynn described empathy as “[allowing] us to get in the other person’s shoes. It allows us to kind of be able to relate and understand a little bit about what that individual is going through”.

In terms of important personal qualities for counselling, John made a list of qualities that fit within this category: “empathy, to be able to place [oneself] aside and focus on the client, [and]...to listen...deeply and accurately”. Without these qualities, John argued that the

counselling session becomes about the counsellor....If the counsellor cannot place themselves aside, they're going to either turn the counselling session into something trivial, talking about whatever comes to their mind or they will...[take] their client's issue and relate them to their own life and then focus on their own life, and...not help the client.

Emily tended to describe empathy more in terms of disposition or at least in less skill-based ways, as well, explaining that

Empathy is really an ability to step into the other person's perspective, to the given context, to their worldview and to resonate with that...so that we can then really engage with them in an collaborative manner in terms of problem solving or personal growth...whatever their goals are for the counselling....It's the ability to step into their worldview and look at it through their eyes....In order for us to really understand them, we have to kind of feel what they're feeling, through their eyes.

Emily often connected empathy with nonjudgment, at one point explaining that “[empathy is] such a cornerstone of counselling...an essential....If we don't have empathy then we really can't connect with others and possibly can't connect with ourselves”.

Mark's different take on empathy also added clarity to the discussion. Though Mark discussed the importance of good communication skills (such as good listening and appropriate sharing), he explained that when he thought of the importance of understanding “the world of other people” that he specifically did not mean empathy. He

said, empathy is “a technique and like all techniques it’s meant to elicit certain things and [thus] you’re creating the world for the other individual”. He went on to say that “our goal is to be able to...be with people, so that *they* can gain a greater understanding of who they are, rather than for *us* to kind of gain a greater understanding of who they are.” Mark distinguished between embodied empathy and empathy as a technique, suggesting that “everything that we do can be empathic, but we don’t necessarily have to use empathy as a technique”. He explained, “If I were to talk to you, I would position myself to be very compassionate, and not in a, you know, effusive kind of way, but [in the sense that] the very stance that I take is one of understanding, one of caring, and...one of feeling for you, but I don’t use that in the Rogerian type of approach”.

It should be clear by now that there is overlap between empathy and the intrapersonal skills of open-mindedness and perspective-taking, just as there is overlap between empathy and the interpersonal skills of warmth and openness. These sets of qualities were easily the most difficult to separate and categorize. However, as complex as the construct of empathy and listening skills was, it seemed to largely fit within the subtheme of interpersonal skills since it chiefly involved effective communication, however explicit or implicit that communication was. Furthermore, it seemed distinct enough from warmth and openness to form its own part of the interpersonal skills subtheme.

Caring/desire to help. This category of interpersonal qualities involves caring, a desire to help, and other similar social dispositions. Two participants specifically cited a quality in this realm as central to the practice of counselling, while others mentioned,

more in passing, the importance of being caring or having the “desire to help people”. Mark, as just mentioned, explained the importance of taking the *position* of caring and compassion in a helping relationship.

Paul said that “to be a good counsellor...you need to want to help people with their issues”, referring many times to the ideal counsellor qualities of being “charitable”, “community-minded”, “loving”, “compassionate”, and of being “a caring, generous, giving person” with a “big heart”.

Adam conceived of care as meaning “that you genuinely are drawn to people and you like them”. He added that “this goes back to unconditional positive regard”, meaning that “some of [the client’s] behaviours, some of their approaches to things are frustrating and can be problematic, but at the root is this sense...that they’re still a human being that I respect and value and have an unconditional positive regard for”.

Warm/open. Finally, there is the complex cluster of warmth and openness. As mentioned, qualities in this category not only relate to empathy, but to the intrapersonal qualities of openness, which I attempted to delineate from interpersonal qualities of openness based on their internal versus social nature. However, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills justifiably overlap and intrapersonal skills can easily be conceived of as foundational to related interpersonal skills. In this case, an (internal) cognitive flexibility that allows for perspective taking will in turn foster acceptance, nonjudgment, and other open ways of interacting with clients. These in turn may impact a person’s ability to be warm toward, or present with, a client, because of an open, nonjudgmental stance or attitude. These kinds of connections were present in the data.

Several participants discussed the importance of being accepting and nonjudgmental toward clients. Adam connected caring to being less judgmental, while Emily tied openness and nonjudgmental acceptance to each other as well as to the intrapersonal qualities of perspective taking and flexibility. She also mentioned the importance of being “attuned to issues of difference and diversity and communicating awareness and sensitivity and competence in that respect”. Lynn listed openness, acceptance, nonjudgment, and respect as connected to empathy, but explained that

if you don’t have acceptance, you’re not going to have counselling relationships because people will pick up that you’re not open-minded in terms of if you’re going to judge me in some way, or...based on what I’m saying to you or my culture or my preferences...if I’m not open, it will show and it will impact my ability to work, and an individual’s ability to be open with me.

When describing one of the central components of counselling practice, John listed warmth, or the ability to create a “warm, safe place” for a client where the client will know that the counsellor “is going to be there for them”. He said that without feeling safe

you’re not going to talk, and you’re not going to come back and you might not go—if that’s your first experience of counselling—you might not go to a counsellor again....If you’re going to really open up about your deepest darkest pain, you want to make sure that the person that you’re sharing with is going to be safe.

John also linked this safety and acceptance to warmth, saying, “I can’t see one without the other”. Further, John expressed that he saw being a warm person as different from displaying warmth, with the former not being very teachable and the latter being amenable to change.

Finally, like John, Emily thought of openness and nonjudgment as the opposite of rigidity. In this, she explored the idea of a candidate being closed off to certain presenting issues, such as to abortion or domestic violence. She explained that

there’s nothing to say that a person must be comfortable working with the full range of counselling issues—being aware of that is really important—but if there’s a sense of rigidity around being able to connect with the humanity of others, that certainly would be something to explore at the interview stage.

She added that “they’re probably not going to be ranked as highly as somebody who seems to be able to embrace connection with humanity, in all clients, regardless of history and presenting issues”.

This cluster of warmth and openness has overlapped with many other categories and is thus perhaps the most diffuse and the hardest to delineate. It could be included alongside the quality of caring, but that fails to connote the part of it that is best related to an open-mindedness and perspective-taking that allows for a kind and loving disposition toward a client. It could also be included alongside empathy, at least in terms of the dispositional qualities that were discussed in that cluster. However, empathy and good listening skills seemed to relate more directly to communication, while warmth and openness seemed to relate more to the affective presence of a counsellor. Regardless, in

presenting warmth and openness together as a separate element of counsellor interpersonal skills, I have tried to represent the social but seemingly distinct nature of this cluster as it was discussed in the interviews.

Scholarly abilities. Scholarly abilities represent the fourth and final subtheme falling under the theme of qualities deemed important for counsellors to possess. Though academic qualities were not of express focus in my research, they still arose when discussing personal qualities important to the practice of counselling. This seems logical considering the overlap between academic and personal qualities and the general focus on academic abilities during admissions. Moreover, many academic qualities could likely be filed under intrapersonal skills (i.e., planfulness, commitment, and other self-regulatory behaviours).

Paul listed the quality of being knowledgeable, smart, or academically strong as important to the practice of counselling. He noted that “it’s not like intelligence has nothing to do with counselling”. He linked this to what was previously discussed as *human understanding*, but also suggested the need to be “knowledgeable about what’s known in the field of psychology” and to have a “solid background in the science of psychology”.

Adam, Mark, Lynn, and John also mentioned the importance of scholarly or academic strength, but they generally did so in the sense of preparedness for graduate school. While they sought students that were articulate, with appropriate academic backgrounds and academic promise, they did not overtly deem these qualities as necessary to sustain a counsellor through her career.

Theme 2: Assessment of Personal Qualities During Admissions

This theme analyzes participant reflections on the assessment of personal qualities in admissions and is separated into four subthemes. In the first subtheme, *Current Practices*, I examine the various ways that participants described currently assessing personal qualities during screening. The second subtheme, *Preferences about Personal Quality Assessments*, gathers participant opinions regarding the importance of assessing for personal qualities and ideas for how to assess for them during screening.

The third subtheme, *Issues in Assessing Personal Qualities*, explores participant concerns regarding personal quality assessment. The fourth, *Reflections on Interviews*, gathers participant data concerning both how interviews are used and issues that arise with interviews.

Current practices. This subtheme explores the current practices that participants indicated were being used to assess for personal qualities during the screening stage. This topic is explored in the sense of both informal and formal assessments, where the participants were often asked explicitly if their programs assessed formally and/or informally for personal qualities in the admissions process.

Three participants indicated measures or steps during admissions that explicitly incorporated personal quality considerations. The degree to which they concurred that this was *formal* assessment varied. This seemed in large part to do with what was meant by formal assessment, whether this merely represented explicit assessment (or judgment) regarding personal qualities or actual standardized assessment of personal qualities. No one indicated the use of standardized assessments, but three participants indicated

consensus within their programs to assess for personal qualities during interviews or, even more explicitly, they indicated the use of rubrics that ranked for specific personal qualities after observing or interacting with applicants. As mentioned earlier, some of these rubrics were used in different ways by faculty.

Emily explained that her program considers personal qualities throughout the process, including during “the file review and the interview itself”, and that the admissions team works collaboratively, specifically when assessing such qualities. In another program that used a rubric that included rankings for specific personal qualities, the participant suggested that while “personal qualities very much enter in”, this was still the “subjective part”.

In general, most participants agreed that their programs assessed for personal qualities informally, though to varying degrees. Paul explained that,

It’s great for us to try to pick applicants who, as well as being really strong academically, show that they’re really good people, caring people, people of integrity. And I think all of us, to some degree informally, try to take those types of questions into account.

He acknowledged that “these things come into play in our judgment about people” but that this did not happen “in a really explicit, formal way”.

In terms of where participants saw that they could access certain personal qualities during admissions, the main focus, outside of interviews, seemed to be on letters of intent, letters of reference, and sometimes from past work or volunteer experience. For example, Paul thought that

the letters of recommendation,...their experience working with people and their statement of intent...would probably be the three areas where I'm building a picture of...more than academics...of a much more kind of, who is this person and what are they all about.

Adam expressed similar sentiments, saying that, though informal,

the letter of intent gives [applicants] an opportunity to share some of themselves and their willingness to self-reflect, and their letters of reference, when they're well done, do tell us something about that individual and their ability to work with other people.

On the other hand, he added that he thought that GPA, psychology background, and relevant work and volunteer experience "doesn't tell us anything" in terms of personal qualities.

Lynn indicated that some personal qualities might "show up, for example, in the rationale" and that "it's implicit in there that some of those traits are there". However, Lynn did not "remember conversations where [the committee] looked at characteristics". She said that

what I'm more likely to hear around a table in the application process is 'this one has a wealth of experience, you know, they've had this kind of background, they would really bring a lot and offer a lot to this program'. I don't hear, and I don't think we have really anywhere to judge on a regular basis, that someone is demonstrating a lot of self-awareness...except maybe sometimes in the rationale.

In fact, Lynn added that her program has “no way right now to measure [personal qualities], to access that information, because we don’t make contact with the students in the application process”.

Preferences about personal quality assessments. This subtheme includes participant thoughts about the importance of assessing for personal qualities during the admissions process. It also gathers participant responses regarding how personal qualities could be assessed if they were not already screened for or how current practices might be improved upon.

Of the three programs that already assessed for personal qualities, these participants were clearly in agreement with this practice. John thought that personal qualities should definitely be a factor in admissions, saying that he was confident in this both because of the “tremendous amount of research” and “also just personal experience...having been counselled, [and] having seen terrible counsellors”. Emily agreed that admissions processes needed to look beyond academics and “at the nature of the person”. She reiterated the importance of this as due, in part, to the power that counsellors ultimately hold: “We hold a lot of power in that counselling relationship and it has to be wielded so very carefully. So, that’s where those concepts of...awareness and attunement and sensitivity are so very important”. She added that mental health professionals work with “oftentimes very serious, very grave issues for [clients] that could have very dire consequences if not addressed properly...so that’s where some of those issues like empathy and openness come into play”.

Lynn said that she would like information about personal qualities during admissions since “it would certainly make for stronger applicants”, and Adam agreed that it was important to assess for personal qualities. He indicated a heightened sense of determination to incorporate more explicit assessments in coming years.

In terms of how such assessments might be done if they were not already, one participant said that their program had “talked about this” and that they “would do small group interviews...getting [applicants] together in small groups and then devising some strategy to get them to interact with each other...to get some sense of whether they have some of these personal qualities”. One participant indicated that they liked group interviews for their ability to show interactions between applicants, as well. Another applicant said that they had not really thought about how personal quality assessments would be done specifically, but that their program had discussed doing interviews which they thought would be helpful. This participant offered the idea of “developing scenarios” since “having students talk about how they would respond in different situations might help us gain a sense of how in tune or aware they are”.

John conceptualized personal quality assessments as being best done in an “informed qualitative” way. He explained that “there’s some things that you cannot get quantitatively...so...the skills that make a qualitative researcher are the same skills that make for assessing personal qualities in...applicants.” He listed these as “listening, listening for...patterns, listening for trends, listening for things that resonate with the research”. He stipulated that this process “has to be informed qualitative...you don’t do a qualitative study without doing a lit[erature] review”.

Finally, Paul came at this area of discussion differently:

If there was some way of reliably and validly measuring whether or not somebody has these personal qualities, would I consider that important in the admissions process? Um...yeah. I mean, but that's a huge *if* because I have no idea how you'd reliably and validly measure these things when you barely know these people...like, what would be the markers that you would say, 'oh well that person clearly has the kind of integrity and caring that we want'?

Paul thought that "if we were able to figure out what it is [that makes a therapist really great],...and then measure that, then we would be crazy not to look for it in the admissions process". When I reflected to Paul that he thought that "at this point, that picture isn't clear enough or reliable or valid enough to base admissions decisions on", he endorsed this as not "just [his] perspective" but, he thought, "an accurate statement".

Despite his realism and demand for reliable, valid, and objective measures, Paul suggested that personal qualities or something like it were likely central to effective counselling:

The issue is that more and more studies where they're looking at [therapist variables] are showing that it's huge. The therapist variables are way bigger in the scheme of things than we've ever really appreciated. In other words, some people have a quality that helps clients get better and you see it across all their clients, like all their people are getting better...but we don't yet really understand what it is. And I'm going to put it to you that it's probably not academic ability or...whether or not they got A-plusses in grad school, or what techniques they're

using. It's probably not that. It's probably mostly these kind of personal qualities, that some people just have something that's very healing to other people.

Issues in assessing personal qualities. This subtheme explores various concerns about the assessment of personal qualities in admissions, mostly to do with validity, objectivity, and fairness. For example, John expressed the desire for “more formal guidelines” explaining that his “feeling is that we don’t have a solid enough structure, so we have long conversations about some applicants”. As mentioned, John wanted to ground personal quality assessment in research.

Paul took this a step further, suggesting that, “you have to have a really objective way of trying to measure [personal qualities]...or you’d be sued”. He questioned how basing admissions decisions on a hunch or gut feeling would stand in a court of law. He added,

I don’t really see how they could [assess personal qualities] without by all kind of human rights and legal standards being very challengeable....We have to judge based on concrete evidence and we have to be able to afterwards show people, well, these are the things that we judged on; these are the criteria we judged on....There has to be some concreteness to them. You can ask somebody, do you have any experience working with people and can you show us measurably that you have that? And then you can write a statement of intent, we can, you know, we can draw conclusions, but it’s concrete. You always have to be able to point to concrete evidence and a lot of these personal qualities that I ideally like to see

people have, um, it's only within the parameters of us being able to actually look at evidence of some kind that we can make judgments.

Paul consistently connected these sentiments to the need to be fair in the admissions process, saying that “you have to use reasonably objective criteria and you have to use them in a fair balanced way”. He also discussed fairness for applicants themselves.

Paul expressed concern about fairness for applicants who have “jumped through every hoop that's been presented to them”, planning and working hard since high school to be a therapist, both by getting top grades and volunteering. He said it would not be fair if you were to say to them, “I'm going to not let you in because this other person over here, who hasn't done any of that...seems to me like somebody who has...all these other things that...I really look for”. Paul also related this to the selection of medical doctors, saying,

We'd all like a certain type of person as our personal physician, but how are they going to judge that in a way that applicants can feel assured that they're being treated fairly? I mean, these are legal and human rights questions above and beyond professional kind of admissions questions.

Finally, Paul also gave voice to the issue of how well an admissions committee can really know an applicant in order to be able to sufficiently judge their personal qualities: “however much I know people, I mean, I don't know the applicants....You really only know somebody's character after you've been around them for 10 years or something,...or you're married to them”.

Reflections on interviews. The subject of admissions interviews consistently arose during this research, with half of the participants already using interviews in admissions to assess personal qualities, and the other half mentioning the desire for interviews or otherwise critiquing them. In this section I will explore how interviews were said to be used by participants and their programs, as well as the various stated costs and benefits to such practices.

The people who used interviews were resoundingly attached to them as crucial elements of the admissions process. Emily thought that the interview “yields too much additional valuable information to rely on the paper files alone”. John said that the interview is “essential to our success rate because very often we pick up things in that interview that don’t come across anywhere else” such as a “lack of social skills, poor fit with the program,...a coldness, [and] lack of social awareness”.

Mark acknowledged that even though it was only a 30-minute impressionistic window into a person, he “would never give up the interview” since he “absolutely” believed that it helped to access some of the personal qualities important to counselling. He also mentioned that it provided a “two-way street” because “[applicants] get a chance to see what they’re coming into”. Mark also discerned between telephone and in-person interviews, recalling a specific time when despite the telephone interview, a person had slipped through: “Had that person appeared in person, I think we could have gotten a better sense of some of the dysfunctionality that was going on in his or her life”.

Adam shared that upon reflection, he saw “more and more of a case for the importance of interviews because we’re doing this informally but we’re not really

assessing what we want. We're still opening ourselves up to the possibility of making mistakes". He said that in interviews he could look for both positive qualities and red flags, "things that I'd be looking for that say, this, based on past experience, suggests that this could be a problem down the road". He thought this would perhaps be reflected in behaviour such as being dominant, inflexible, or exhibiting poor attending skills.

When discussing how her program might formally or informally assess for personal qualities, Lynn said, "this is where sometimes I think we wonder if we need to use interviews....How do you assess for empathy in...an application form?" She added that her program group had "been saying for years...we should have [the interview] process because...we may be able to catch somebody in that process".

Paul, while admitting that he "actually would prefer if we had interviews", was skeptical of their value. He explained that he knew that "the cognitive literature is that our judgments about these things are not that accurate". He also referred to an absence of evidence in support of interviews as accurate measurement tools, adding that he had "seen people do really, really well in interviews and it's no guarantee of anything". He explained that evidence from interviews is "always going to be superficial in relation to who [applicants] really are as people". In general, Paul did not "buy" that spending half an hour with someone would provide credible knowledge about personal qualities.

On the other hand, Mark reflected on interviews differently:

there is an assumption within counsellor education programs that an interview process is ideal, right, yet when you look at all the programs, not everybody does an interview, and there are varied reasons for that. Sometimes people don't think

that the interview is all that helpful. Other people feel that...it just takes up too much time for what you get out of it, you know, it's just not worth it. So, we all have different views but...I know certainly there are people who have themselves gone through an interview process and then have gone to programs where there is no interview...[and] they really feel that the caliber, not all of them, but you do have a better selection process [in the programs with interviews].

Other participants noted the various costs of interviews, with several acknowledging their subjectivity and limited nature. Emily saw them as “time-limited” snapshots, saying they were not a “fail-safe”. John also worried about the subjectivity, and Adam acknowledged that applicants could fake things in interviews too, especially because they last only a short period of time.

Resoundingly, the participants who currently conducted admissions interviews, as well as those who thought about doing so, noted how time-intensive this sort of process could be. Emily said that her program calculated something around a “full month of work hours allotted to the admissions process”, and others noted that admissions interviews were “labour intensive”, especially since the “application process is already very time-intensive”. Participants also acknowledged that interviews were logistically troublesome since applicants generally apply from all across Canada.

Still, despite these limitations, Emily and Mark felt confident in the interview process, and John said that interviews were “very valuable” despite their drawbacks. Almost all participants believed that they either would or already did make better decisions with the addition of admissions interviews.

Theme 3: General Considerations for Personal Qualities and Graduate School

This final theme explores many salient points made by participants regarding personal qualities and graduate training in counselling. First, I examine participant reflections on the teachability of qualities important to counselling in general and during graduate school (*Training Personal Qualities*). In the second subtheme, *Growth Orientation*, I gather dialogue concerning counselling as a growth-oriented profession. The third subtheme, *Self as Foundation*, explores the notion of using the self as the instrument in counselling as well as gaining competency through foundational personal qualities. This subtheme also discusses the deferral that many participants made to the need for personal development when applicants or students presented with deficiencies in skills or qualities.

Training personal qualities. This subtheme covers what was generally referred to as the “teachability” of personal qualities. During most interviews, after participants explored the qualities they deemed important to counselling practice, they were asked about how teachable they thought these qualities were. Many participants indicated a belief in people’s growth potential, but acknowledged the limits in both extreme cases and because of the logistics of their programs. In general, some qualities were seen as more teachable than others.

Emily explained that “if we had unlimited resources and unlimited time and that would also entail...unlimited time to meet one-on-one with students, then there are very few students that I would see as not appropriate candidates for the profession”. She thought that “there’s so few things in life that aren’t amenable to growth with some

support and some...assistance from others sometimes”. Mark expressed a similar perspective that things were “teachable, learnable...from a self perspective”.

Some qualities appeared to participants to be more teachable than others, and participants expressed some degree of confidence in being able to train participants in these areas. For instance, Adam thought that empathy (as a reflective listening skill) was very teachable and Emily wondered if being nonjudgmental and accepting was in part “an educative piece [and] that once in the program, there’d be a great sensitivity around the nuances of language”. Similarly, others thought that certain skills would naturally and automatically grow from the graduate school experience. John thought that “it’s hard to study counselling psychology, do your own stuff, and hear the stories of other people without gaining depth”. Mark also agreed that even if people are minimally self-reflective, they are likely to grow when presented with the multiple learning opportunities and challenges inherent to graduate school.

Paul thought that self-awareness was developable, to some degree, and while Emily said that it was “nice” to see “indications of some level of self-awareness, self-knowledge, [and] insight”, that these things “can be fostered for sure”. She said that since her program promotes “critical analysis [and] reflection all the way through” that students could “hone” these skills.

Along these lines, however, many participants suggested the desire or need for at least minimal levels of relevant personal qualities to be able to foster them. For instance, Adam was not adamant that people be flexible, but acknowledged that it was “a hard thing to teach”. Lynn felt similarly about self-awareness, thinking that ideally “it would

be nice to have that for people coming in” but that the program would develop those skills, too. While Lynn thought that empathy would be a quality to draw someone to counselling psychology in the first place, she thought that “some of it can be learned as well”.

John explained that if warmth and acceptance seemed to be “totally absent” in an applicant that he did not think “that they’d ever get into our program”. He said that his program had “had some students who were fairly stiff, who had trouble displaying their warmth, but the warmth was there under the surface and we were able to help them bring that out”. John also thought that a person probably had to have at least a spark of modesty or “teachableness” in order to grow in those areas. In general, John could think of cases where students lacked certain qualities and were able to be remediated, as well as other cases where remediation did not help. He estimated these rates at around 50%.

Certain qualities were conceived of as much harder to teach than others, often because of the age at which students typically enter graduate school, and thus were seen more as prerequisites. For instance, Emily thought that “on the whole, things like empathy and flexibility and so on are probably going to be a little less inclined to change in our later adulthood”. Emily also said that a commitment to life long learning was a quality that her admissions committee definitely wanted to get a sense of in the interview.

Adam was “adamant that you’ve got to have [genuine care and concern for others] beforehand [since] we’re not going to be able to teach you to like people”. John thought that students “definitely” needed empathy before beginning graduate school, saying he could not see “making an offer to anybody who did not have empathy”.

However, he recalled two recent students who undertook demanding remedial work and were able to learn empathy. In these cases, he was glad to have stuck with these students for how they had turned out.

Paul thought that “things that are characterological [and] personality related” were more black and white, explaining that

there’s a genetic load there, there’s...your family history, and...if you don’t have that by the time you’re 18 or 20, you are who you are...There are certain qualities that make for really great therapists and psychologists...[and] you love to see that in students but you can’t always tell whether they have it and if they don’t, I mean, I don’t think, you know, you can do what a family hasn’t done in 20 years.

Paul acknowledged that the question of teachability was difficult and complicated, and expressed the hope that you could “nudge people a little bit forward” and that “through the training and experience, they’ll grown and flourish”. However, Paul also thought that

if somebody really doesn’t have those personal qualities...there’s nothing a professional training program can do to give them. There are character issues...we can’t mould people’s characters, I mean, they either have a certain kind of integrity and conscientiousness and wisdom or they don’t....We try really hard to do the best we can to nurture the latent talents and abilities people have but there is a personal thing that is part of being a really great counsellor that you don’t learn at school.

Finally, despite the perceived teachability of various qualities, several participants said that the limitations of their programs drove the requirement of certain prerequisite personal qualities. For instance, Emily explained that

[students] have to kind of march along at the same rate [as their cohort] and that's where we have to...look at [if] we think that there are going to be significant impediments to the person succeeding in the program as it's currently laid out.

Mark added that

the intention is that there are...some prerequisite skills and knowledge and experience, you know, some foundational stuff upon which you can build, because with 20 people in a cohort there's no guarantee who's going to pick it up and who's not going to pick it up and...the amount of work the professors have to do in a counselling program is really disproportionate to what other faculty professors do—the work that we have to do with the personal development of individuals—so really there's not enough time in the day to do that.

Mark explained that “some people just don't really have the requisite skills and it would take too long and too much work to really help [them],” adding that “we can't do that...the programs aren't built for that”.

Growth orientation. Participants commonly referred to counselling as a growth-oriented profession. Often this was in the form of invoking the need for students to be ever-evolving or committed to growth. At other times, it was through participants' modest representations of themselves as still learning.

For example, Lynn explained that “you’re not going to have all the skills you need to function out there. You never will; I still don’t”, adding that she “[continues] to develop even now”. John admitted that despite being a counsellor for over 25 years, his “learning curve is still high” and Mark said, “I’ve been doing it for 30 years...and I don’t know that I’m a great counsellor”. Paul also echoed these sentiments while explaining the qualities that he saw as important to counselling: “The picture I’ve painted is an idealization...it’s, like, nobody – I’m not, like, I’m not, *that*. You know, we’re all just kind of shmucks doing the best we can with what we have”.

Carrying on from this was the common notion that students and counsellors themselves always need to be growing and learning. Lynn explained that “if growth stops for you, growth stops for your profession” and that “curiosity will carry [students] beyond their program”. Adam shared his thought that “students need to come with the perspective that this is about growth and it’s about an ongoing self-reflection”, and John explained that “you never stop growing in this profession”. Some tied this to the innovation constant in the field of counselling, with Emily saying that “once you sign on it really is a career of learning for the rest of your life because the field is just so huge and ever-shifting and ever-changing and ever-developing”.

Self as foundation. This subtheme gathers participant suggestions about the use of the self in counselling. Sometimes participants discussed the self as the primary instrument in counselling and at other times participants suggested that the self was the foundation of counselling. This seemed especially the case when participants suggested that personal counselling might be the next best step when a personal deficiency was

noted. In other words, when students struggled or applicants seemed to lack requisite personal qualities, participants would suggest counselling, more life experience, or something decidedly nonacademic. I came to think of this as a deferral to personal development.

Emily was probably the participant who referred most often to the need for “personal work”, suggesting that “for most of the [personal qualities] that we’ve been discussing, if it’s not...following the sort of normal developmental trajectory, there’s a good chance that personal work could get something unstuck and let them move forward”. Emily suggested personal work, counselling, and “a couple more years of living in the world” as remedies to a variety of deficiencies in the areas of self-worth, self-esteem, genuineness, empathy, and other personal qualities. For example, she explained that “if we’re encountering [a lack of genuineness] in the interview stage, and it’s really raising questions for us, then my sense is that it would behoove that applicant to...engage in more self-reflection and/or some personal counselling themselves”.

Lynn also connected problems to the need for counselling, suggesting that if students underwent reviews during the program, theoretically speaking, they “may be asked to maybe get counselling”. John mentioned having told applicants to apply again after getting more life experience, and Mark also referenced the centrality of life experience to applicant evaluation. In a similar vein, Adam discussed the inclination for self-reflection as likely relying on feelings of safety, self-security, and self-confidence, suggesting that the genesis for some important personal qualities is the condition (or environment) of the self.

Relating to this was the notion of the self as the instrument necessary to counselling as well as the suggestion that a person could base many counselling skills upon the foundation of a healthy self or upon other personal qualities. For example, Mark thought that “a sense of self and taking care of self and allowing those other qualities to develop like...the awareness of others and how to position oneself....All the other stuff kind of falls away, falls through that I think”. Adam also thought of the ongoing process of self-reflection and self-work as “the things that will impact your ability to provide these other things...[such as] empathy, unconditional positive regard, and caring”.

Part of seeing the self as the instrument or foundation was expecting that counsellors could “really only lead as far as they’ve travelled themselves”, as Emily said, or applying the same expectations to counsellors as to clients. Adam said that he holds himself “to the same unconditional positive regard that [he holds] other people” and saw a certain degree of “your own understanding of yourself as the vehicle for understanding how students and the clients [you] work with also develop”.

In the end, it was Lynn who related the importance of the self as the foundation for one’s career to the overall scope and purpose of graduate school. Lynn explained that “one of the struggles that I have is what is it that we hope people leaving a master’s program such as ours should attain before they get out and work”. She said that the faculty in her program “constantly struggle with what it is that we do and how we do it and how much we do...and whether it’s enough”, but she admitted that “it’s never enough”. Lynn said that people will work as counsellors or psychologists after obtaining

only a master's degree which "can't provide everything". This led her to think about more foundational skills:

I think about curiosity and I think about desire to know and learn and seek that out. Those are the types of things that, as an individual, I need to be able to say that, you know what, I have the foundation. I know what this is supposed to look like;...I've been given the basic skills....I think the concept that I'm kind of sitting on...is that we develop—we help facilitate the growth of novice counsellors and then they're out there, they haven't practiced very much except in their internship but they will continue to seek out supervision and practice and professional development so that they continue on that journey of growth. It's not over when you get your master's.

Lynn noted that the personal qualities are "the start", adding,

To me, it's knowing you don't know—that you've got a good foundation and that you've got to continue to develop, and the importance of continued growth. And I think that if you have that and you understand that...you'll figure out the missing pieces.

Concluding Thoughts

This last results chapter has focused on analyzing and presenting data related to personal qualities in counselling and graduate school. First, I analyzed the personal qualities that participants deemed important for counsellors to possess. Following that, I explored various participant reflections concerning how personal qualities are currently assessed during the screening process as well as how they may be assessed in the future.

The last theme of this chapter covered general reflections on personal qualities as they relate to graduate school and the career of counselling as a whole. This section touched on the teachability of personal qualities as well as the common growth-orientation and deferral to personal work as a remedy for personal and professional deficiencies. A discussion of these topics will be presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 6: Discussion

In this chapter, I reflect on the research findings in this study, drawing connections between various themes as well as between the results and current literature. I engage in this discussion in an order that in many ways mirrors the structure of my results. The four main sections are as follows: *Admissions in Counselling, Ideal Counsellor Personal Qualities, Personal Quality Considerations in Admissions*, and *Personal Qualities in Graduate Training and Beyond*.

Admissions in Counselling

In the first place, as in Chapter 4, my research generated important data concerning admissions processes to master's-level counselling programs *in general*. In other words, aside from personal qualities, my participants provided valuable information in terms of how the process of admissions worked in their programs. Before embarking upon a discussion of personal qualities in admissions, this discussion will first focus on more general admissions concerns, as did Chapter 4. This section contains four areas of focus: *Application and Admissions Criteria, The Decision Makers, Reflections on Applicants*, and *Gatekeeping and Gateslipping*.

Application and admissions criteria. First, the subtheme, *Evolution of Process*, demonstrated that within the group of participants in this study, counselling and counselling psychology programs did not have static or set-in-stone admissions policies or practices. All participants indicated past changes to their admissions process and many indicated possible future changes. This seems to indicate that admissions protocols are not fixed or singular, but rather that they are still evolving and improving. Furthermore, it

indicates that programs are at least partly self-guiding in their selection of screening measures, even if basing such decisions on tradition or common practice, and that a variety of methods may be used across institutions. In other words, there does not seem to be complete consensus regarding best practices for this first point of entry into the counselling profession, and many programs are still open to systems that would better protect students, universities, the profession, and society.

Another factor here is that admissions reviews may be based largely upon what has been done in the past, for better or worse. Though the traditions governing admissions might reflect best practices, it is also possible to critique such tradition as sometimes arbitrary, or at least not reflective of current research or needs. In this, it seems prudent to see admissions reviews as neither permanent nor necessarily fully evolved. Sometimes doing what has historically been done is not doing what is best.

Application criteria and stages. Compared to the research reviewed in Chapter 1, the various application criteria and stages described by participants very much mirrored the literature. For instance, letters of recommendation were relatively ubiquitous, as was the use of GPA, personal statements, and experience, both here and in the literature (Helmès & Pachana, 2008; Nelson et al., 2003; Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014). On the other hand, only half the participants in this study used interviews of some sort, while the reviewed research seems to indicate more prevalent use of interviews in the United States, at least (McCaughan, 2010; Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014).

In terms of admissions stages, many participants indicated an initial rule in/rule out stage. This means that without certain grades, years of experience, or degree-types,

applicants are not considered for admission to some programs. In no way a decidedly good or bad thing, this merely marks a stage at which a clear determination is made by programs in terms of what is absolutely necessary to even be considered a viable candidate. Some programs will state a minimum GPA, for instance, which has certain implications for the program and draws a clear distinction of a future counsellor or psychologist as necessarily academically successful (at least in some sense). Other programs will determine that students are not appropriate candidates if they do not possess a degree in psychology or education, endorsing certain backgrounds or base knowledge as necessary to future practice or at least to graduate school. Others will determine that a certain amount (and/or type) of work or volunteer experience is necessary to embark on this career through their program. Of course, the reasoning for these criteria were not deeply explored in this study, but there was some mention that these selection criteria were in place to better guarantee the success of students once in the program and/or later in their careers. In this, many participants seemed to view admissions as a stage of gatekeeping not just for the program itself but for the profession. In other words, while some criteria seemed to be based upon admitting students who could succeed in graduate school, others seemed to stand as gates to the profession itself, especially in regard to future projections of competency and goodness of fit. The degree to which participants projected into the future and concerned themselves with professional gatekeeping varied.

Overall, review stages and types of reviews represented by participants mirrored findings in the literature in that many indicated using a mixture of subjective and

objective measures, individual and collaborative decisions, and formal and informal means of assessing applicants (Nagpal & Ritchie, 2002; Nelson et al., 2003; Swank & Smith-Adcock, 2014; Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010).

Rankings and rubrics. Explicit rankings or rubrics for admissions reviews were used in some represented programs, though in diverse ways, and often optionally. However, it did seem that amongst the rubrics used by participants' programs in this study, the clearest scores corresponded to measures of GPA or academic background. In other words, a Likert-type scale used for GPA was often more explicit in terms of what GPA it took to earn each score, whereas the Likert-type scales for rating letters of recommendation, statements of intent, or specific personal qualities appeared to be more subjectively determined.

Specific criteria reflections and predictive power. As echoed in the literature, concerns did arise regarding some specific admissions criteria such as letters of reference. Some participants acknowledged that letters of reference are typically written very positively and as such have a larger impact whenever anything even slightly negative or less-than-glowing is included. Similarly, Nelson et al. (2003) reported that participants in their study found these letters somewhat helpful but noted that they had failed to provide good discrimination between applicants since they are typically overly positive. Furthermore, this theme of watching for red flags to determine an applicant's unsuitability instead of selecting applicants based on desired qualities or aptitudes mirrors a trend that has been criticized in the research (McCaughan & Hill, 2015). This form of

screening can be criticized for exerting too little focus on selecting the best and most able candidates for the profession.

All participants in this study indicated the use of GPA and academic background as admissions criteria. In terms of predictive power, some literature demonstrates that while these measures can predict further academic success, they are not predictive of clinical success (Bethune & Johnson, 2013; Kendrick, 2012; Smaby et al., 2005). In using these criteria, programs may be prioritizing immediate or short-term academic success over long-term clinical or professional success. Regarding letters of recommendation and student autobiographies (most similar to letters of intent or personal statements), Piercy et al. (1995) found that these measures were also not predictive of later clinical success (or academic success for that matter). Instead, Piercy et al. found that life experience and past client experience were the measures that better predicted later clinical success. This latter point would indicate that the consideration of work and volunteer experience permits programs represented in the current study to better ensure later clinical success, but that the use of letters of intent and recommendation may not be sufficiently predictive of either clinical or academic success.

On the other hand, research presented in Chapter 1 did show that personality measures were predictive of later professional competency (Bethune & Johnson, 2013; Williams, 1998). However, no participants indicated the use of any sort of personality testing during admissions (and some explicitly objected to it as a potential). Concerning interviews, many participants indicated the necessity of these measures for selecting appropriate students for their programs and for the career of counselling. However,

according to some research, interviews were not predictive of later academic or clinical success (Bethune & Johnson, 2013; Piercy et al., 1995).

The studies presented here cannot offer definitive answers in terms of the predictive value of admissions criteria, both because they are limited in number and because many are limited in terms of generalizability. Still, these existing studies suggest that the programs represented in this current study use screening measures that will predict students' academic success, with some measures (i.e., life or work experience) included that should predict their clinical success. It also suggests that some of the measures used by programs represented in this study are not necessarily predictive of either kind of success. Furthermore, although the use of interviews was often seen as essential or ideal by participants in the current study, their predictive power is questioned in some research.

The decision makers. Though their study was small, Nagpal and Ritchie (2002) represented the decision-making process during admissions as both individual and collaborative. According to their study, the majority of faculty members tended to independently assess applicants first, followed later by group discussions and collaborative decision-making processes. In the current research study, all participants seemed to indicate a similar decision-making process: Files were usually reviewed and rated by individual faculty members first, who later convened in order to make collaborative decisions as a program or faculty group. This process generally appeared to involve a great deal of discussion.

Checks, balances, and subjectivity. Concerns about power and fairness were common in this study, with all participants volunteering examples of how their committee used checks or balances in order to maintain fairness and credibility. These checks and balances seemed to fit into the categories of triangulation (using multiple sources of information) and inter-rater reliability (using multiple judges). Participants indicated that these various checks and balances helped to ensure that judgments were not merely subjective (on one person's part) nor that they were based too simply on only one source of information. This largely seemed like a process aimed at generating consensus in order to make sound admissions decisions.

Still, participants acknowledged the subjective nature of the admissions process, no matter the objective or corrective steps taken. In this, admissions processes were not represented as foolproof or as always governed by explicit decision-making markers or measures. Rather, all participants mentioned some degree of subjective judgment, usually based on a "felt sense" or intuition about an applicant. This was often expressed as a form of extrapolation from the data before them, a topic covered in the next section.

Furthermore, even though one participant represented letters of intent and recommendation as objective measures, all participants and their admissions committees still seemed to rely on their subjective impressions of candidates or their own idiosyncratic ways of assessing applicants through these documents. Participants discussed the fact that committee members have their own ways of assessing a letter of intent by, for instance, paying close attention to writing ability, self-reflection, signs of altruism, or red flags. These processes seem subjective insofar as they were often

represented as idiosyncratic rather than structured or consensus-based, at least in the first stages of individual file review.

Participants also deferred to their own experience as a kind of check on the process, seeing themselves as capable of making reasonably fair decisions. This was sometimes based upon a history of serving on admissions committees and at other times was based upon the professional abilities of the committee members as seasoned counsellors, academics, or counsellor educators. This experience signified trustworthiness to several participants.

In the end, participants generally acknowledged the limits inherent to the admissions process whether because of limited time and access to applicants or because of the limits of being able to fairly “know” an applicant at all. Participants also indicated awareness of the biases present within them and the process itself.

Further, when discussions turned to keeping certain students out of the programs, several participants shied away from such determinations, seeming to want to welcome a variety of students and perhaps to ensure their own cultural competency and open-mindedness. Participants often did not endorse certain personality types or therapeutic styles, leaving room for many different approaches and students. This trend seemed to connect common practices, narratives, and worldviews in psychology and counselling with approaches to admissions as well. If a profession is typically governed by competencies or personal qualities such as open-mindedness, unconditional positive regard, cultural competence, and self-growth, the same approaches to counsellor education and admissions to counselling programs are not so surprising. Many

participants seemed to work hard at not being judgmental or overly confident about applicants, just as they were often sensitive to biases and issues that might arise during applicant appraisal (such as gender or religious-based decisions). Of course, judgments and decisions are being made all the way through the admissions stage, and participants seemed committed to making the process transparent, fair, sound, and evidence-based. On the other hand, there was a sense that legal concerns and other influences, such as the pressures to be nonjudgmental, made participants quite shy about making definitive judgments or judgments seen as overly subjective.

Reflections on applicants. In the reviewed literature, the tendency for admissions committees to make collaborative decisions using a mix of subjective and objective material is similar to what participants here represented as their tendency toward holistic judgments. One participant clarified that applicants are not judged “atomistically” and others indicated that their rankings and choices come down to overall assessments of candidates. This tendency was well-reflected in the consistent use of holistic language, looking to get a “sense” of applicants, to build a picture or get an impression, experience the candidate, or see how applicants “come across”. This trend was also represented in Nagpal and Ritchie’s (2002) study on admissions interviews, with the researchers reporting that participants commonly assessed applicants in part through subjective impressions.

In fact, Nagpal and Ritchie (2002) included a quote from a participant in their study that mirrors a subtheme of the results here. They quote a participant as having said that

‘All of us have a tendency to want to try to sense whether or not this is someone with whom clients, colleagues, coworkers, children, parents, teachers, would feel comfortable. Can they put people at ease? Do they invite tension, or do they invite involvement?’ (p. 214)

This not only demonstrates holistic language, it also mirrors the commonly stated practice of extrapolation among participants in the present study.

The subtheme of *Extrapolation* represented the tendency for participants to derive or glean information from sources in a second-hand way or to project an applicant’s behaviour during selection into the future. In the first case, admissions committees use what I came to think of as *markers* to draw certain conclusions about candidates. For example, having volunteered at a summer camp for low income kids might be used as a marker for a candidate that is likely caring or altruistic. In another sense, having a psychology or education degree is a marker that certain knowledge or understanding can be assumed on the part of the candidate. In this, application materials “stand in” as markers for desired qualities, skills, or capabilities. Of course, this could just be interpreted as the language of application and admission, where committees have no choice but to use symbols or signals to indicate the presence of certain qualities or skills in applicants. On the other hand, this use of symbols or markers is not possible without assumptions and interpretation. While the use of interpretation is neither particularly escapable nor necessarily problematic, it does place the admissions process as perhaps inherently derivative or subjective.

In the case of the second category of extrapolation, projecting into the future, participants often referred to the tendency to imagine the future professional competency of a candidate through how the candidate came across during selection. Some participants thought that the admissions interview could serve as a partial proxy for how the applicant might be as a counsellor, and others indicated that they at least extrapolated from how an applicant presented either in person or on paper to that person's potential fit or role in the graduate program. This form of extrapolation represents a kind of gatekeeping for the future profession as well as another derivative and impressionistic practice of the selection process.

Finally, some participants in this study warned against only having paper impressions of applicants, suggesting that important information is thus missed and that gateslipping is more likely to occur. In some cases, the in-person elements were thought to provide evidence of essential communication or fluency levels, and in other cases in-person elements were seen as crucial to the judgment of necessary nonacademic qualities such as warmth, self-reflection, and life experience. One participant thought of this as similar to the use of qualitative inquiry where quantitative inquiry could not possibly be sufficient.

Similarly, participants measured the balance between academic and personal quality considerations during admissions, with some suggesting that selection tipped toward academic strength. On the other hand, several participants noted a distinct balance of academic and nonacademic qualities and aptitudes during applicant assessment.

Gatekeeping and gateslipping. Gatekeeping is the process by which a profession governs membership and it is represented in multiple stages of admission or progression: into school, into internships, at graduation, into professional organizations, and into professional positions. As mentioned in Chapter 1, gatekeeping is an ethical imperative as laid out by both the CCPA (2007) and the CPA (2000, 2009). For example, the CPA (2000) *Code of Ethics* requires that supervisors and professionals refuse to train or delegate responsibilities to individuals who might either harm or fail to benefit clients (Standards II.4 and II.7). Moreover, gatekeeping is argued to begin during admissions to graduate school by various researchers (e.g., Hernández et al., 2010; Homrich, 2009; McCaughan & Hill, 2015), including the Health Service Psychology Education Collaborative (2013).

Whether mandated by the CCPA, CPA, or by no one at all, the participants represented in this study varied in terms of their beliefs about the gatekeeping imperative. Some participants indicated gatekeeping as an ethical duty to the profession present first during admissions, while others did not see gatekeeping this way. However, most participants did see the value in keeping out students who would later be problematic, especially in light of the legal issues that could arise with trying to dismiss a student once admitted and with the labour-intensive and difficult nature of remediation. These sentiments are echoed in the literature (e.g., Forrest et al., 1999; Helmes & Pachana, 2008; Sowbel, 2012).

As for gateslipping, participants in this study acknowledged that students were admitted into their programs despite red flags, or that admitted students were later

discovered to be inappropriate for the profession. Most indicated that somewhere around one or two students a year, per program, were likely not well-suited for the profession. The rates of problematic students as estimated by participants in this study appear to be lower than those found in the literature (e.g., Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Gaubatz & Vera, 2002) though the reasons for this are unclear. On the whole, participants were confident in their admissions processes, suggesting that even with some gateslipping, the processes were perceived to be working well.

Constraints to gatekeeping. Finally, the constraints to gatekeeping, as noted by participants, were particularly interesting. Some participants indicated that their admissions processes had difficulty improving practices or incorporating additional nonacademic measures because of the already intense nature of admissions and the lack of time to add yet more duties or stages. Of course, those who used interviews noted the labour-intensiveness of the practice and yet were unwilling to give them up.

Most notable was the mention of administrative or outside pressures to admit students who the admissions committees had deemed to be low on waitlists, to minimally qualify, or to even have corresponding red flags. One participant explained that his program was required to admit a full cohort for what he indicated were financial reasons, something he thought to be a result of neoliberalism. This financial pressure to admit full cohorts was mentioned by another participant as well. In this, short-term financial benefits seem to put pressure on committees and could impact gateslipping, producing longer-term impacts on the protection of the profession and society. Similarly, one

participant explained that the administration was not necessarily understanding of the need for nonacademic measures and intensive gatekeeping practices.

Considering that other participants also mentioned the changing landscape of admissions in terms of joblessness and a desire for higher paygrades on the applicant's part, as well as the overworked nature of counselling faculty, neoliberalism seemed present in multiple ways. If more candidates are applying to graduate school in counselling for the express purpose of upgrading their teaching license for higher pay or because they cannot secure teaching jobs in the first place, then neoliberalism is not just affecting the admissions process from the institution's standpoint, but from the applicant's as well. In other words, the muddled competition for graduate counselling training could in part be due to economic pressures.

Regarding faculty pressures, if faculty are already overworked (as would be a common tendency in neoliberal economies where fewer people do more work), then surely the admissions process suffers if it is indeed in need of improvements or more attention. Specifically, faculty with a multitude of responsibilities and tasks (e.g., teaching, research, conferences, evaluations, supervision, administration, admissions) would likely not have time (or perhaps even the desire) to add *additional* admissions stages or screening measures.

Moreover, if faculty are heavily burdened, the training and remediation process may also suffer. A particularly salient point was made in this regard by one participant who indicated that the nurturing of students in counselling programs is more labour intensive than in other programs since personal development is involved. Some might

imagine that certain theoretical or procedural knowledge in other graduate programs takes less time to learn than the characterological or personality change that might be required in counselling programs (e.g., becoming more personable, self-aware, or open-minded). If so, heavily burdened or overworked faculty will likely have less time to meet with and develop the persons of their students outside of what is already being done. If this is the case, gateslipping becomes even more problematic since these students are more likely to slip all the way through, and past, graduation if they are either less likely to be noticed or less likely to be remediated.

As a case in point, Gaubatz and Vera (2006) found that students in programs with fewer staff and more untenured faculty estimate impairment at much higher rates than do the faculty members from these same programs. These researchers explained that the lower faculty estimates may be due to the level of awareness possible for faculty who are part-time or who work in programs with less contact between core faculty and students. In their study of counselling master's programs, Gaubatz and Vera (2002) also found interesting correlations between higher reported instances of gatekeeping failures and other factors. For instance, faculty reporting more nonremediated students also employed more adjunct professors, expressed more worry over teaching evaluations, and indicated more institutional pressure to refrain from screening deficient students. All of these factors from both of Gaubatz and Vera's studies could be argued to be symptoms of neoliberalism where fewer faculty have tenured positions, where there is less contact between students and busy core faculty (who may face research quotas, for instance), and where institutional pressure concerns itself with matters contrary to gatekeeping duties.

Furthermore, in an institution where a professor may desire tenure and thus worry about teaching evaluations, it can be expected that the duty to remediate or report problematic students might more often be avoided.

In a different way, it may also be that the tendency to do what seems to work reasonably well rather than what might work best is an approach related to neoliberal or market-driven forces. As one participant indicated, until there is a crisis, there is little reason to change current admissions processes. This prescription fits if motivation must come from crisis or force when the players are otherwise too busy or pressured. In other words, in a market system, a demand might be the only thing to propel change (perhaps in the form of crisis or consensus), rather than the ideals or principles of best practices.

Ideal Counsellor Personal Qualities

This next discussion section focuses on the qualities that participants deemed ideal or necessary to an effective counsellor. The organization of this section will mirror the organization of the results section which organized personal qualities into four major subthemes: *Intrapersonal Skills, Life Experience and Human Understanding, Interpersonal Skills*, and *Scholarly Abilities*. However, this section also includes a final holistic reflection on ideal counsellor personal qualities.

Intrapersonal skills. The intrapersonal skills subtheme was comprised of the following qualities: (1) *self-aware and self-engaged*; (2) *growth-oriented*; (3) *flexible/open-minded*; (4) *professionally dedicated and aware*; and (5) *conscientious*. I thought of the intrapersonal skills subtheme as involving qualities of self-regulation and self-management, a common definition of intrapersonal skills.

In a series of workshops, the National Research Council (NRC; 2011) explored what they have called twenty-first century skills, or skills necessary for the changing landscape of education and the workplace. With refinement over the course of the workshops, the NRC has delineated three major skills clusters: cognitive skills, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills. Their definition of intrapersonal skills is similar to the one that I employed to organize the various personal qualities described by the participants in this study.

The NRC (2011) presented intrapersonal skills as a cluster of skills relying on self-regulation, itself a process that “does not just involve cognition but also involves feelings and emotions” (NRC, 2011, p. 64). In a list of intrapersonal skill examples, the NRC (2011) included “planfulness, self-discipline, delay of gratification, the ability to deal with and overcome distractions, and the ability to adjust one’s strategy or approach as needed” (p. 64). Other descriptors that were used in the document in the category of intrapersonal skills included flexibility, conscientiousness, stress tolerance, and self-development.

Thus, many of the intrapersonal skills listed by the NRC as important to working in the twenty-first century were also mentioned by participants as necessary to an effective counsellor: conscientiousness, stress tolerance (or self-care), self-development (or what I called being self-engaged), and flexibility. The last quality in this category in need of some justification is professional dedication and awareness. Of relevance, the NRC (2011) included planfulness in the intrapersonal cluster, since it is a form of self-regulation necessary for achieving goals. Since participants mentioned planfulness,

reflection, motivation, and self-management as involved in career dedication and awareness, this cluster does seem to fit well in the intrapersonal cluster.

In terms of counselling literature, most of the qualities above were present and quite common in both research studies and relevant codes of ethics. The CCPA (2007) itself devotes a distinct component of their *Code of Ethics* to self-awareness and self-development, and the CPA (2000) has a series of standards that relate to self-knowledge, self-understanding, and self-care. In general, and in regard to a demonstrated lack of important or necessary qualities, Brear et al.'s (2008) review of the literature showed that intrapersonal skills were the most common concern about problematic students.

Self-aware and self-engaged. More specifically, aspects of the self-aware/self-engaged intrapersonal quality are common in the research. Wheeler (2000) found that counsellor educators often characterized good counsellor trainees as secure (i.e., psychologically stable and mentally healthy) as well as self-aware. Jennings and Skovholt (1999) found that excellent practitioners were self-aware, in good mental health, and self-caring. These researchers also indicated that excellent practitioners commonly seemed to connect their own emotional health with their counselling efficacy, mirroring identical sentiments of some participants in this study.

Pope and Kline (1999) found that emotional stability was ranked highly among personal qualities of good counsellors, and Halinski (2009) listed self-awareness as one of the more commonly cited personal qualities for counsellors to possess. In terms of the studies looking at the problematic absence of certain qualities in this category, researchers found common issues with self-awareness (Brear & Dorrian, 2010),

emotional regulation (Brown-Rice & Furr, 2013), and self-reflection, stress-management, and mental health issues in general (Henderson & Dufrene, 2012).

Other intrapersonal clusters. Regarding what participants in this study commonly cited as the ideal counsellor qualities of being committed to learning, curious, and growth-oriented, these qualities are also present in the literature and professional codes in various forms (CCPA, 2007; CPA, 2000; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Vacha-Haase et al., 2004). Similarly, the qualities of flexibility and open-mindedness are very well-represented in the literature (Halinski, 2009; Henderson & Dufrene, 2012; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Pope & Kline, 1999; Wheeler, 2000). As for professional dedication and awareness, these qualities are not well-referenced in the literature reviewed in Chapter 1.

Finally, conscientiousness was mentioned only twice in Chapter 1. First, Williams (1998) found that low hypochondriasis scores on the MMPI-2, which themselves indicate higher levels of conscientiousness, were significantly predictive of better counselling effectiveness. Conscientiousness was also predictive of later medical school success, likely because of this quality's usefulness in internship settings (Lievens et al., 2009). Furthermore, the CPA's (2000) *Code of Ethics* regularly refers to constructs similar to, or subsumed by, conscientiousness including the need to be fair, responsible, and honest, and to behave with integrity and respect. This code also sets the standard that psychologists "honour all promises and commitments" (Standard III.17, p. 24).

Overall, the intrapersonal skills mentioned by participants in this study are largely reflected in the extant research and codes of ethics governing the professions of

counselling and counselling psychology. In most of these cases, consensus seems reasonably established.

Life experience and human understanding. Participants in the current study represented qualities of human understanding, life experience, and wisdom as part of what makes counsellors effective. This subtheme has been reflected in the research by Jennings and Skovholt (1999) who cited rich life and work experience as central to therapist mastery. Furthermore, a specific cluster of researchers (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2001, 2003; Skovholt & Starkey, 2010) discovered wisdom as a central construct in counselling mastery. For instance, Rønnestad and Skovholt (2001) explained the need to process experience in order to gain wisdom, while Skovholt and Starkey (2010) linked wisdom to an understanding of the human condition and of human change.

As was mentioned by multiple participants, this subtheme also involves what Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) have described as “increased tolerance for human variability” (p. 37). Rønnestad and Skovholt (2003) further described the development of wisdom as involving the “integration of the professional self and the personal self” (p. 27) and explained that this integration takes place at both the intrapersonal and interpersonal level. In other words, wisdom involves a connection between introspection or reflection and actual social behaviour or judgment (such as being accepting or open-minded). This latter point lends credence to the idea that life experience and human understanding represent a bridge between the intra- and interpersonal subthemes, as emerged in the present study’s data.

Interpersonal skills. The subtheme of interpersonal skills was comprised of the following qualities: (1) *other-aware*; (2) *personable*; (3) *empathic/good listener*; (4) *caring/desire to help*; and (5) *warm/open*. In this subtheme, I gathered qualities that participants said involved some kind of social skill or social behaviour facilitative to the counselling profession. The subtheme of interpersonal skills is defined variably in the literature and by the public at large, but similarly defined by the NRC. During the NRC (2011) conference on twenty-first century skills, Fiore presented from a paper (Salas, Bedwell, & Fiore, 2010) devoted to defining and assessing interpersonal skills. In turn, Salas et al. (2010) drew heavily from Klein, DeRouin, and Salas (2006) who presented a taxonomy based on their review of the literature on interpersonal skills. Klein et al.'s (2006) taxonomy organized interpersonal skills into two groups: *interpersonal communication skills* and *relationship-building skills*. This first category contained listening skills as well as various forms of communication skills (i.e., oral, written, assertive, and nonverbal communication). The latter category of relationship-building skills contained skills such as cooperation and coordination, trust, intercultural sensitivity, service orientation, self-presentation, social influence, and conflict resolution and negotiation.

In summary, the NRC (2011) described interpersonal skills as “a form of social intelligence” that has “attitudinal, behavioral, and cognitive components” (p. 42). Salas et al. (2010) also explained that interpersonal skills involve a “feedback loop of sorts, in which socially competent individuals continually adapt their behaviors based on feedback (i.e., verbal and nonverbal cues) from others involved in the social exchange” (p. 6).

Many of the elements mentioned in this literature were presented by participants, in some form, as desirable personal qualities in counsellors.

Other-aware. For instance, being other-aware, as I have called it, corresponds in part to the self-presentation aspect of relationship-building skills in the Klein et al. (2006) taxonomy. Klein et al. (2006) related self-presentation to impression management which would necessarily include the need to understand one's impact on others. Though less present in the counselling research, Wheeler (2000) also included being aware of other people's needs as an important counselling skill. Henderson and Dufrene (2012) likewise found consensus in the literature about the need for counsellors to be aware of their impact on others. It is also likely that this particular cluster of other-awareness is confounded with the intrapersonal component of self-awareness as participants in this study often switched fluidly between discussions of self-awareness only in regard to the self and self-awareness in regard to one's impact on or interactions with others.

Personable. The importance for counsellors to be personable is also widely corroborated by the literature, though sometimes under different labels. Wheeler (2000) and Jennings and Skovholt (1999) specifically referenced the need for counsellors to be personable, but Jennings and Skovholt added to this the need to relate well with others. In another study, Brear and Dorrian (2010) found that rapport-building failures ranked highly as issues for problematic students. In this category, the importance of being genuine and authentic, as mentioned by one participant in the present study, was quite common in the counselling literature (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Pope & Kline, 1999; Wheeler, 2000). In fact, in her review of the literature, Halinski (2009) found that

genuineness ranked as the fifth most referenced personal quality. For some reason, this quality was not mentioned frequently by participants in the current study.

Empathic/good listener. Empathy and good listening skills were some of the most complex qualities in the subtheme of interpersonal skills in this study. However, these skills are common in the corresponding literature (Brear and Dorrian, 2010; Henderson & Dufrene, 2012; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Pope & Kline, 1999; Wheeler, 2000). In fact, Halinski (2009) listed empathy as the second most referenced personal quality in the counselling literature on counsellor effectiveness. Still, the complexity of empathy is clear in the literature as well, when in Henderson and Dufrene's (2012) content analysis of the remediation literature, they delineated difficulties with empathy *expression*, highlighting the component of empathy that is skill-based as opposed to more dispositional. Relatedly, Klein et al.'s (2006) taxonomy listed the interpersonal skill of active listening as related to empathy but as not necessarily synonymous with it.

Having reviewed the participants' explorations of empathy, I began to see that empathy was being construed in two semi-distinct ways. What seemed like a clear divider in terms of the conceptualization of empathy came in the form of how teachable the participants deemed empathy to be. While Adam thought of it as very teachable, Emily and Paul both indicated that it was not that amenable to change, at least once a person was in their twenties. However, from getting a sense of their definitions of empathy or the way they described it, I would argue that this was less a difference of opinion on teachability and more that the participants were talking about different constructs.

In the first case, empathy seemed to be defined more in terms of listening skills or reflecting skills. Regarding listening skills, participants discussed the need for self-control so as not to dominate, to inappropriately self-disclose, or to listen without an orientation to the client's world. For reflective skills, Adam explored the ability to accurately reflect client sentiments or messages. Because these are all perhaps more clearly skills-based, their teachability might seem more possible.

In the other case, however, empathy often seemed to be described as a cognitive or affective practice in this latter more disposition-oriented way. This meant getting into other people's shoes or feeling what they feel, and was the definition more often associated with compassion and affective connection, and thus as less teachable. In many cases, too, empathy was discussed as the trait otherwise absent in people with autism or a serious personality disorder, and thus more clearly linked to notions of its modification as difficult or impossible. Similarly, some participants invoked the extreme example of sociopaths, who seem conventionally thought of as unable to experience empathy. This example represents a construct seemingly more diffuse and significantly less teachable than the idea of being able to sufficiently paraphrase or reflect a client's experience or message. While one might lay the foundation for the other, and while the two concepts seem meaningfully linked, there was a distinct difference in how participants in this study represented empathy and its correlates, perhaps justifiably so.

Caring/desire to help. The category of interpersonal qualities that involved caring and a desire to help can be found as well in Klein et al.'s (2006) taxonomy of interpersonal skills. These researchers invoked these sorts of skills under *service*

orientation, which they said included “a set of basic individual predispositions and an inclination to provide service, [and] to be courteous and helpful in dealing with...clients” (p. 86). While these qualities or traits were represented by a few of the participants in the present study, they are not as well cited in the literature (e.g., Jennings & Skovholt, 1999, Pope & Kline, 1999). Perhaps most closely related is the construct of altruism which Halinski (2009) found referenced in 7 of the 47 documents that she reviewed in her literature review. However, subsumed under her category of *warm and accepting* was the construct of having a caring attitude. Therefore, my separation of this construct here confounds its true representation in the literature, at least as per Halinski. Of course, the CPA (2000) itself includes an ethical standard of general caring, expecting that psychologists improve the welfare of both society and clients.

Warm/open. Finally, being warm and open was commonly referenced among participants in the current study, and these qualities are also well-represented in the counselling literature. In fact, Halinski’s (2009) review found that the dispositions of being warm and accepting were the most cited qualities for counselling competence. As per my explanation that this interpersonal openness and warmth might rest upon the foundation of intrapersonal flexibility and open-mindedness, Halinski (2009) included open-mindedness within her category of being warm and accepting. Thus, the tendency for these constructs to be confounded and to be seen to greatly overlap is found in the literature as well. In my own review of the literature, the need for warmth and openness was represented in various ways. Wheeler (2000) found the importance of being open, friendly, and warm to others, while Pope and Kline (1999) discussed the importance of

being accepting. Similarly, Jennings and Skovholt (1999) characterized master therapists as warm, supportive, and as people who could create safe spaces for others. In their study on common problematic behaviours in counselling students, Brear and Dorrian (2010) found that being judgmental was ranked highly.

In general, interpersonal skills were well-represented in the research as important to counsellor competence or mastery, especially when commonly cited as problematic if absent. For instance, Brear et al.'s (2008) review showed that interpersonal problems were the second most cited issues for problematic counselling students, and Henderson and Dufrene (2012) listed interpersonal skills as the main problem with unsuitable students in the category of intrinsic characteristics. Others found that interpersonal skills were highly ranked as reasons for counsellor trainee deficiencies (Brear & Dorrian, 2010; Vacha-Haase et al., 2004). Thus, there was significant consensus between the current study and existing research.

Scholarly abilities. While scholarly abilities were not largely in focus in the present study, participants still mentioned the importance of these traits or skills. Considering that every program in this study focused to some degree on GPA and academic background, these factors were at least important in terms of graduate school success, though only one participant explicitly endorsed them as central to later counsellor success. This participant strongly endorsed having a “solid background” in, and understanding of, psychology and the science of psychology. Conversely, other participants indicated that they did not believe that a psychology background was necessary to a counsellor's success. While most participants mentioned the need for

applicants to be academically prepared and able to succeed in graduate school, they focused more on other seemingly nonacademic personal qualities when speaking about long-term counsellor efficacy. However, the common endorsement for counsellors to be growth-oriented and curious could fit into the category of scholarly abilities.

The literature reviewed in this study did not specifically explore the need for scholarly abilities as a component of ideal counsellor personal qualities. This seems chiefly to be due to scholarly or academic abilities being conceived of or represented as separate from personal qualities, though they are arguably inseparable. Just as interpersonal skills and intrapersonal skills are highly confounded, academic abilities and other personal qualities would be as well. For instance, conscientiousness and other self-regulatory abilities seem important to academic success, and there does not seem to be a line where qualities pertaining to academic abilities end and “nonacademic” personal qualities begin.

Final reflections on important counsellor personal qualities. Qualities that were reported by participants in this study to be important for counsellors to possess were generally very well-aligned with the extant research. In terms of Halinski’s (2009) consensus, the most commonly cited qualities of effective counsellors (i.e. warmth and acceptance, empathy, self-awareness, and flexibility) were almost ubiquitously mentioned here. Genuineness, the fifth most common personal quality found in her review, was less present in this current study.

In terms of Henderson and Dufrene’s (2012) effort at consensus in the remediation literature, the participants in this study mentioned almost all the same

qualities: interpersonal skills, maturity, flexibility, capacity to handle stress, ability to take feedback, and self-awareness. However, ability to deal with conflict and to express feelings were not mentioned directly by any participants in this study.

Still, considering this relative consensus, the six counsellor educators who were interviewed for this study described ideal qualities quite in line with studies from other countries, indicating that the Canadian counselling context may not be so different than others.

It is exceedingly important to point out the complex and overlapping nature of the constructs chosen and found in this study and in the other research presented here. As referenced in Chapter 1, chosen categories are often idiosyncratic to researchers. Furthermore, the choices about how qualities should be organized into those categories is a matter of interpretation. In this study, I generally categorized qualities based on if they seemed intrapersonal, interpersonal, or neither. However, some other organizational systems mix intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities together. For example, Halinski (2009) mixed intrapersonal open-mindedness and interpersonal openness within one category whereas I chose to separate them. In other cases, Halinski (2009) mixed qualities that I deemed somewhat distinct, such as in the case of warmth and caring. I also separated wisdom and intelligence, though others confound those (e.g. Wheeler, 2000). I tried to remain true to the data in terms of how participants seemed to define constructs, and I found that using the categories of intrapersonal and interpersonal qualities made the most sense out of the complex data, without detrimentally muddying what participants had meant or expressed.

Overall, it seems that the kinds of qualities that come up arise again and again, but that they are variably labelled, variably defined, and variably categorized. Being in contact with participants while they explored important counsellor personal qualities provided insight into the complexity of this topic, especially as it relates to how these qualities might factor into admissions processes. I had firsthand experience of how difficult it was for participants to define some of the labels they offered, or to describe them in a way that did not invoke a multitude of other overlapping and yet not truly synonymous qualities. For instance, the complications with the constructs of empathy and good listening skills became a prime example of the difficulty of trying to isolate and categorize socially constructed traits or skills. With only six participants, there was still significant disagreement about what empathy was, what it looked like, how teachable it was, and its relative importance to counselling. Thus, this part of my research study provided a salient example of the complicated process that an admissions committee faces if, and when, they attempt to incorporate personal quality considerations into their admissions reviews.

Finally, the literature echoes these sentiments. Regardless of the ethical imperative to gatekeep in regard to personal qualities, as well as the general consensus on the importance of personal qualities for counselling mastery, the lack of clear consensus in terms of exact definitions or labels has been said to interfere with clearly incorporating these considerations into admissions processes (Brear et al., 2008; Forrest et al., 1999; Sowbel, 2012). Furthermore, this complexity can explain the ensuing variability in personal quality assessment, as explored in the following section.

Personal Quality Considerations in Admissions

This third discussion section focuses on the current personal quality considerations during admissions processes. As in Chapter 6, discussions involve how personal qualities are assessed in the programs represented in this study as well as reflections on the assessment of personal qualities.

Assessment of personal qualities during admissions. The selection processes and criteria used in the programs represented in this study were largely similar to what was found in the research. However, personal quality considerations seemed to be less in balance with academic considerations in many cases compared to what was presented in Chapter 1 as common practice. Half the participants in this study explicitly assessed for personal qualities through interviews or other means, with these participants indicating that their admissions committees explored the personal qualities of applicants overtly during admissions decisions. The other three participants acknowledged that personal quality considerations might factor into admissions decisions, but these cases seemed much less explicit or intentional.

There were several reasons given for not assessing personal qualities more formally. First, one participant explained that her program had no way of really assessing such qualities since there was no contact with applicants, though she did acknowledge that some information might come through in application documents. Another participant expressed grave concerns about the ability to ever assess for personal qualities considering the subjective nature of such assessments. He thought that explicit requirements of certain character traits would not only be highly difficult to assess but

that it would also likely create issues around fairness, ethics, and legality. The third reason appeared to be more logistical or administrative in that some participants indicated the time constraints of admissions and thus the difficulty of incorporating interviews or some other explicit assessment stage focused on personal qualities. It also appeared as though the traditional admissions processes leaned toward academic reviews as opposed to personal quality reviews and that some programs had yet to change their processes away from what had typically been done, despite some desire to do so. Of note, however, is that one program did use interviews in the past but had ceased using them at some point. Though the reason for this was not explored, this participant suggested interviews may be reinstated in the future.

To be clear, interviews are not necessarily in place in programs that use them to assess for personal qualities, just as some programs may indicate assessing for personal qualities despite not using interviews. However, participants in this study seemed to see interviews as a place to assess for personal qualities, and when discussing how they might incorporate personal quality assessments in the future, many gravitated toward or remained committed to interviews. This suggests that interviews were commonly conceived of as the primary avenue for nonacademic admissions reviews.

However, in reviewing the admissions literature, there was mention of other means of assessing personal qualities as well. Perhaps one of the most representative studies, since it involved 79 American master's programs in counselling, was Swank and Smith-Adcock's (2014). This study found that programs used a variety of admissions tools to directly assess for personal qualities. These included standardized tests or

faculty-administered assessments, portfolio submissions (including videos or projects), and “experiential exercises” (e.g., role-playing, responding to case studies, or giving presentations). There seemed to be a wider variety of admissions tools in this research than was found in the current study. None of the six participants here indicated the use of standardized or faculty-administered assessments and most were opposed to the idea. No participants indicated the use of experiential exercises either, other than perhaps in the case of the interactions involved in group interviews by one participant. One participant did acknowledge the use of a portfolio-type submission in their program, however.

As a review, in some of the Australian research (e.g., Helmes & Pachana, 2008), the bias toward academic criteria somewhat matched some of what the participants in this current study represented about their programs. On the other hand, the participants here would seem to place their programs in the minority when compared to American programs that demonstrate more common use of interviews and other nonacademic screening measures. For instance, in Swank and Smith-Adcock’s (2014) study, 82% of the 79 reviewed master’s programs used interviews or some other experiential exercise during admissions. While the current study does not represent all of Canada and is not generalizable, that interviews were used in 50% of the represented programs indicates a *possible* difference between American and Canadian admissions protocols.

Overall, despite the general consensus that personal qualities are important to counselling and that some of these qualities would be best assessed during the admissions stage, the participants represented in this study showed various levels of practices aimed at assessing personal qualities. Moreover, half the participants indicated that their

programs had no explicit assessment of personal qualities, and the personal quality assessments that were noted seemed to be done in informal or chiefly subjective and relationally focused ways. While these methods and decisions are complex, there does seem to be somewhat of a disparity between what most of the participants in this study might determine to be best practices and what practices are actually employed by the represented programs.

Reflections on the assessment of personal qualities. Regarding the preferences about personal quality assessments, interviews were almost unanimously favored by participants in this study. Furthermore, all participants who currently indicated using interviews during admissions were very committed to them. These participants saw interviews as incredibly valuable and believed that they significantly improved the decisions made during admissions reviews. Two others agreed that interviews would improve their ability to adequately screen for personal qualities. These positive sentiments regarding interviews mirror McCaughan's (2010) research with 61 American master's counselling faculty members. In this study, interviews were cited as the most effective screening measure, above all other measures. Interviews were also found to be endorsed as the best method for screening personal qualities.

However, the use of interviews, as represented in other research, adds complexity to the debate about their use. For instance, Nelson et al. (2003) represented worries similar to one participant in this study in terms of the lack of formal and structured processes to ensure sound interview protocols. Furthermore, despite a commitment and deep belief in the usefulness of interviews both on behalf of many participants in this

research and in the literature (e.g., Leverett-Main, 2004), interviews were not predictive of academic and/or clinical performance in several studies (e.g., Bethune & Johnson, 2013; Piercy et al., 1995). However, Piercy et al. (1995) point out that part of the reason that interviews may not be predictive of future success is because they occur so late in the selection process, meaning that they provide little discernment between already strong candidates. In other words, the applicants selected for an interview are already the strongest applicants in the pool and the differences between them will be harder to detect. Furthermore, this measurement of predictive ability does not follow applicants who are screened *out* of the process by the interview, since they are not admitted and thus do not face subsequent skills assessments. Therefore, the interview may not discriminate between applicants accepted into programs, but may enable programs to screen out inappropriate candidates.

Overall, the research on interviews that was reviewed in Chapter 1 is not overly promising, but it is also not complete or definitive. Thus, it may be that interviews for counselling admissions are perceived as more important or discerning than they actually are, or it may be that these interviews are indeed helpful, at least for weeding out inappropriate candidates. This is an area not sufficiently explored in the counselling literature. However, the medical school literature predominantly represents traditional interviews as neither reliable nor valid, but does suggest that more structured and formalized interviews can be effective screening measures (Patterson et al., 2016). Regardless, what has been represented preliminarily in this current research study is that interviews are the preferred method for personal quality assessments.

Personal Qualities in Graduate Training and Beyond

This fourth section focuses on discussions about ideal counsellor personal qualities as they intersect with graduate training and the profession in general. This, as in Chapter 6, involves the teachability of personal qualities and the implications of counselling as a growth-oriented profession.

Responsiveness of personal qualities. Answers were far from definitive when it came to assessing the teachability of personal qualities relevant to counselling mastery, at least in most cases. While some participants described empathy as unteachable, others thought that it was entirely teachable or at least moderately so. This, as reviewed previously, may be due principally to a participant's concept of empathy.

Other skills were also seen as relatively unteachable, such as flexibility, warmth, or characterological traits such as conscientiousness. On the other hand, some personal qualities were thought to be teachable, especially with unlimited time and resources. In light of this, however, several participants discussed the reality that graduate programs were limited in terms of the time and resources for the personal development of students and thus that minimum levels of qualities were required, even if just because of logistics. This sentiment is also present in the literature (e.g., Goodyear, 1997). One participant was more definitive about the inability to teach certain traits, comparing the 20 or so years that a candidate would have had to learn their way of being in the world with the two or so years that they would spend in the program. He thought the latter would not have much impact on the former, at least in terms of character and personality.

Overall, there was little consensus among participants in this study regarding the ability to teach various qualities during graduate school. However, participants did generally agree that certain levels of most relevant qualities were either required or desired in applicants. In comparison to the research, Pope and Kline (1999) found that the least responsive or teachable personal qualities, as determined by participants in their study, were emotional stability, open-mindedness, interest in people, acceptance, resourcefulness, sympathy, genuineness, empathy, confidence, friendliness, and tolerance for ambiguity. Some of these qualities were represented as relatively unteachable among the participants in the current study, but others were either not mentioned at all or were not seen as minimally responsive to training.

As mentioned during the exploration of empathy, a complexity regarding the teachability of personal qualities seems to correlate with whether they are conceived of as skills or as dispositional traits. Similar to one participant's thoughts that empathy is more an embodied trait than a technique, other personal qualities might be conceived of as "ways of being" that cannot be taught as discrete skills. Though somewhat outdated, one particular study does lend some clarity to this discussion, as reviewed in Chapter 1.

In their study, Gallagher and Hargie (1992) found that microskills typically seen to indicate qualities such as empathy, acceptance, and genuineness, do not correlate well with actual ratings of such dispositions or qualities. As mentioned, these researchers suggested that teaching discrete skills as a way of instilling deeper qualities in students is not necessarily effective, and that the actual embodiment of salient personal qualities is

more complex, idiosyncratic, and diffuse. Personal qualities, in this sense, cannot be reduced to mere microskills.

Finally, the teachability debate and its impact on admissions processes as well as on general judgment of counselling trainees (including remediation and dismissal) has been explored alternatively. Similar to the idea that the common narratives in psychology and counselling influence counsellor educators to attempt to be nonjudgmental and often relativistic, the notion that most or even many personal qualities are teachable may be reflective of the growth-orientation common in the profession of counselling in general. To be a counsellor, one generally has to believe that people can change. Therefore, the idea that personality is fixed or that rigidity, closed-mindedness, insensitivity, or altruism might not be amenable to change would be somewhat antithetical to much of the profession's leanings.

For example, McAdams, Foster, and Ward (2007) indicated that gatekeeping was impacted at their own institution because of "a hope that the problems would self-correct" (p. 222). Similarly, some researchers explain that supervisors may take on too much responsibility for students instead of simply dismissing them (e.g., Kerl et al., 2002). Kerl et al. (2002) and others (e.g., Elman et al., 1999) suggest that counsellor educators may work with trainees from a human development or counselling perspective, having empathy and patience for change, and thus deprioritizing the duty to protect future clients.

A particularly salient comparison here comes from the social work literature wherein Sowbel (2012) highlights the difference between enacting an "educator-student"

dynamic versus a “worker-client” dynamic. In this sense, a social worker (or counsellor) educator might view students as they would a client capable of change and growth, clearly indicating a program that “[attends] to student potential rather than suitability” (p. 34). Kerl et al. (2002) also describe this tendency:

Most counselling faculty are clinicians themselves, and it may be difficult for them to see themselves strictly as educators who are responsible for teaching skills rather than as clinicians working to assist in personality or behavior change. Furthermore, many counselling faculty members believe that counselor education includes helping students to change worldviews, attitudes, and behaviours that are inconsistent with professional practice. (p 324)

These strengths-based and change-focused lenses, common in both social work and counselling, reveal an underlying ideological position about who is and is not able to be a social worker or counsellor. If we believe that fitness for these careers is based upon acquirable skills and traits, then working with students from this perspective might seem sound. If, on the other hand, we believe that certain traits need to be intrinsic to the person or even just that a two-year graduate program might not adequately foster certain abilities and dispositions no matter the nurture provided, then the trend noticed by Kerl et al. (2002) and Sowbel (2012) seems both problematic and indicative of a gatekeeping failure.

Self as foundation. The idea that counselling is a profession that relies greatly upon the counsellor’s “self” was common in the current study. Participants often referred to the need for students to be self-developed and to continue to develop throughout their

career. Most notably, participants regularly invoked the need for further counselling or “personal work” to counteract deficiencies in personal qualities. This is corroborated by the research, as well. For example, Russell and Peterson (2003) studied marriage and family therapy master’s programs, and found that the most common method of remediation was referral to therapy. This was also the case in Vacha-Haase et al.’s (2004) review of 103 American doctoral-level programs for clinical, counselling, and school psychology.

This tendency seems to reveal that the personal qualities that many participants believe necessary for counselling mastery are not developed through academic courses, *per se*, but rather develop from life experience, self-reflection, and active self-work. Again, some research supports the notion that counselling mastery originates from life experience, practical work experience, and personal therapy (Lorentzen et al., 2011; Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005; Skovholt & Starkey, 2010).

This discussion is also reminiscent of the research reviewed in Chapter 1 that suggested the need for students to use self-care to reduce impairment (Schwartz-Mette, 2009). This self-care was conceptualized as resting upon the foundation of self-awareness and self-regulation, and, as such, this author invoked intrapersonal qualities as a remedy for deficiencies. As argued previously, this indicates that Schwartz-Mette offers personal quality remedies to personal quality issues suggesting, once again, the need for certain foundational personal qualities in order for basic competency and later excellence to be possible.

Similarly, in his review, Goodyear (1997) determined that “it may be that motivation and persistence are the most important variables in predicting the eventual attainment of expertise in professional psychology” (p. 251). While he also thought that certain threshold levels of intelligence and interpersonal skills were likely necessary before graduate training, he suggested that what was really at stake was the *rate* of being able to achieve mastery, not the ability to ever do so. In this, his reference to motivation and persistence mirror the belief in foundational intrapersonal qualities as determining eventual excellence, and the need for these traits at the outset.

Relatedly, for participants in the present study, qualities such as self-care, self-regulation, and self-reflection were very commonly referenced as foundational to other qualities, such as being other-aware, having a deep human understanding, being relationally competent, and excelling in graduate school and professional tasks. In fact, one participant said this quite clearly when she expressed the need for basic personal qualities such as curiosity and a determination toward ongoing growth to be the foundation for competence throughout one’s career. She explained that since graduate school cannot possibly prepare a person completely for the counselling profession, instilling or solidifying basic skills or qualities, such as an orientation toward growth, could propel a graduate more solidly toward a successful and effective career.

These sentiments seem to indicate that intrapersonal skills are perhaps foundational to other important interpersonal skills, and that this preliminary cluster of skills might be especially important prerequisites to counselling training. If one needs to be able to self-reflect, to nondefensively explore one’s inner world and workings, and to

engage effectively in self-care in order to foster other secondary but equally as important qualities to counselling efficacy, then their requirement before graduate school might be advised. Similarly, if conscientiousness, emotional stability, or qualities such as commitment to learning or a sophisticated career planfulness are intrapersonal skills that will enable a counsellor to function effectively in the long term, then those qualities might be considered prerequisites. On the other hand, if we believe that we can teach planfulness, life long learning, self-reflection, insight, and other foundational skills, then the focus is likely to be on their training and embodiment over the course of a master's program instead of on their existence beforehand. Overall, it seems that a variety of intrapersonal skills are commonly seen as prerequisite to other qualities and skills, and to being a self-sustaining, trustworthy, and competent counsellor throughout one's career.

Concluding Thoughts

In this study, I had three main research questions. First, I wanted to know how admissions committee members in Canadian master's-level counselling and counselling psychology programs consider and assess personal qualities in applicants. This was a sufficiently broad question and was clarified by my two sub-questions: What personal qualities do admissions committee members consider important in counselling practitioners and why? And, if deemed important, how might admissions committees ideally assess for relevant personal qualities in applicants?

In the end, this study generated preliminary answers to these questions and to many other questions as well. What seems clear is that the programs represented in this study had predominantly similar admissions processes, though some favored

nonacademic reviews more than others. Furthermore, while all participants deemed personal qualities to be of central importance to a counsellor's competence, agreement on exactly what these qualities were and how to define and operationalize them was less established. Still, most of the exploration in this area mirrored the extant research.

Overall, participants in this study represented variable views on the screening of personal qualities at admissions, though most were generally in favour of the practice. Divergence seemed to arise most in terms of how personal qualities might best be screened at the admissions stage. More investigation into the topics represented here is necessary to generate further clarity.

Chapter 7: Limitations and Recommendations

This chapter explores the limitations of the current study as well as recommendations for future research.

Limitations

There were various limitations in the current study. First, this study was not intended to be generalizable, nor can it be, due to the sample size and sampling method. The perspectives of the six participants in this study add value to this research area because of their uniqueness from, and overlap with, extant research, not because they can be seen to fully or fairly represent the Canadian context or all counselling and counselling psychology programs in Canada. Thus, this study is preliminary, exploratory, and nongeneralizable.

Furthermore, while this study generated a great deal of insight into the topic at hand, it still left many areas unexplored. With such a complex and socially constructed topic, there were many times when I reviewed interviews and saw missed opportunities to more deeply explore what a participant meant by a particular sentiment, phrase, or word. I often made assumptions about what certain words meant to participants and in retrospect wished I had more time to make sure that I was understanding what they meant. Of course, time was limited and the nature of language is inextricably symbolic.

Similarly, the language that I chose to use in this research study propelled the discussions in certain directions. For instance, using the terms *formal* and *informal* when inquiring about the assessments that were used during admissions often directed conversations toward standardized assessments. This is not necessarily what I intended

and it limited these conversations somewhat. Other terminology would have done the same in other categories, and thus a limitation of this research study, as in many qualitative research studies, is the framework that my choice of language created.

Another great and perhaps limiting influence that I had on this research came with my choices of themes and subthemes. While I worked reflexively and attempted to be transparent and fair in my interpretation of the research findings, I still filtered the discussions and analysis through my own worldview. I created an organizational system that seemed both true to the data and logical, but this system is my own. Thus, another researcher may well have organized the results entirely differently, to perhaps a dissimilar end. Furthermore, my position as a student alters my understanding of faculty sentiments and of counselling programs, and it is likely that my interpretation would have been different were I in a similar position to my participants.

A more specific limitation of this research was that participants were not provided with interview questions beforehand. This meant that participants had to come up with answers in the moment and that results were biased to whatever came to mind during the interview time. For example, several participants indicated that they would probably think of additional personal qualities salient to an excellent counsellor once the interview was over. While this may have had some benefit, it also means that responses were likely different than they would have been if participants had been given time to prepare.

In retrospect, it seems that my research endeavour explored two vast topics. First, I investigated admissions processes both in general and in terms of counsellor personal qualities in a subset of Canadian counselling and counselling psychology programs.

Second, I investigated faculty beliefs about counsellor personal qualities deemed central to counselling mastery. My research might have been better off had I chosen only one of these avenues and been able to explore it more deeply. While this research seems to have generated much value in both categories, I could have better explored the teachability of personal qualities or the nature of collaborative decision-making processes during admissions reviews, for instance.

Another limitation of this research, as well as much research in general, is the nature of consensus. As mentioned, consensus does not equal truth, and thus, most people agreeing about something does not make it the right or best way. This research is no exception to this. Therefore, I want to add a caveat to much of the consensus found in this study and between this study and others. Sometimes the marginalized voices are what later become more “true”, and sometimes consensus only indicates what most people follow, for better or worse. The self-fulfilling and biased natures of human cognition and human behaviour could be analyzed at many stages of this research and in much of the data. Therefore, while consensus was discovered in this study, it should not be taken to mean that truth was found.

Recommendations for Further Research

Research on personal quality assessments during admissions is both extremely complex and insufficiently explored, both in general (Hernández et al., 2010) and in the Canadian context (Sebok & MacMillan, 2014). This study appears to be one of the first to investigate how Canadian master’s programs execute the admissions process in general and in terms of personal qualities. Thus, more research is needed on this topic. A

quantitative study of admissions processes in Canadian counselling and counselling psychology is advised, in addition to further exploratory qualitative studies.

Furthermore, in reviewing the literature, I found almost no research on the viability of developing personal qualities through graduate training in counselling. While I could find research on the impact that graduate training had on counselling efficacy, I could not find much at all on how students and counsellors were themselves changed in these ways through their training. Furthermore, though counselling skills have been found to be enhanced through master's-level study in counselling (e.g., Schaeffle, Smaby, Maddux, & Cates, 2005), these skills are often measured as discrete microskills (i.e., eye contact, body language, summarizing, questioning) and thus say little or nothing about the training of dispositional or personal qualities such as warmth, empathy, and self-reflection. Furthermore, demonstrating counselling or microskills does not necessarily mean that a person is, or is perceived by clients as, an effective counsellor, just that they can exhibit or perform certain skills. Therefore, much more research on how graduate training impacts students is needed in terms of how students may gain intra- and interpersonal skills through training. If counsellor personal qualities are important to mastery, their genesis needs to be explored along with the impact that graduate school might have on them.

The research on what makes counsellors effective also seems to be limited and thus in need of further and more diverse exploration. While the international study by Orlinsky and Rønnestad (2005) surveyed nearly 5000 psychotherapists and was significant to this area of research, it provided data only from the perspective of

psychotherapists. Thus, research on client perspectives would provide further insight into what makes for effective therapists. A better understanding of client perspectives is especially important since what has been found to be important from the therapist's perspective has not necessarily correlated well with what has been deemed important from a client's perspective (Heinonen et al., 2014). Other perspectives might also be explored (i.e., counsellor educators, counsellor trainees). Furthermore, additional quantitative studies on therapist effects (as opposed to therapist techniques) on client outcomes are advised.

Finally, research on the effectiveness of educational gatekeeping in Canada would be of great use. It seems prudent to know how well Canadian counselling and counselling psychology graduate programs are preparing students to practice counselling and how those students are functioning out in the field in terms of various competencies. It would help to know better how well the profession of counselling in Canada is working, and how this might be connected to the methods of training counsellors or to the gatekeeping imperative itself.

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Appendix A: Research Recruitment Document

My name is Heather Gower, and I am a student in the Counselling Psychology program at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I am conducting a research project called The Consideration of Personal Qualities in Admissions for Canadian Master's Counselling and Counselling Psychology Programs for my master's degree under the supervision of Dr. Greg Harris. The purpose of the study is to investigate how faculty members consider and assess personal qualities in admissions processes for Canadian master's-level counselling programs.

I am contacting you to invite you to participate in a **telephone interview** in which you will be asked **to share your thoughts about personal qualities that you believe to be relevant to the practice of counselling, as well as how these relevant qualities currently and ideally factor in to admissions decisions for master's-level counselling programs**. Participation will require approximately **45-60 minutes** of your time and interviews will be held over the phone.

I am seeking **Canadian counselling and counselling psychology faculty members** who have served on an admission's committee for a **master's-level program** in the past **5 years**.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please contact me to arrange a time to talk.

If you have any questions about me or this project, please contact me by email at hkg604@mun.ca, or by phone at 780-937-4328.

If you know anyone who may be interested in participating in this study, please give them a copy of this information.

Thank you in advance for considering this request,

Heather Gower

Greg Harris (gharris@mun.ca, 709-864-6925)

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr.chair@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Title: The Consideration of Personal Qualities in Admissions for Canadian Master's Counselling and Counselling Psychology Programs

Researcher: Heather Gower, Counselling Psychology Graduate Student, Education Faculty, Memorial University, hkg604@mun.ca, 780-937-4328

Supervisor: Dr. Greg Harris, Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland, gharris@mun.ca, 709-864-6925

You are invited to take part in a research project entitled “The Consideration of Personal Qualities in Admissions for Canadian Master's Counselling and Counselling Psychology Programs”.

This form is part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. It also describes your right to withdraw from the study. In order to decide whether you wish to participate in this research study, you should understand enough about its risks and benefits to be able to make an informed decision. This is the informed consent process. Take time to read this carefully and to understand the information given to you. Please contact the researcher, Heather Gower, if you have any questions about the study or would like more information before you consent.

It is entirely up to you to decide whether to take part in this research. If you choose not to take part in this research or if you decide to withdraw from the research once it has started, there will be no negative consequences for you, now or in the future.

Introduction:

My name is Heather Gower and I am currently a Master's student in the Counselling Psychology program at Memorial University of Newfoundland. As part of my Master's degree, I am conducting research under the supervision of Dr. Greg Harris, a Professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland.

Purpose of study:

Graduate admissions committees serve a gatekeeping function for the professions of Counselling and Counselling Psychology and they prioritize certain qualities and attributes in applicants. The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of how Counselling and Counselling Psychology faculty members who serve on admissions committees consider and assess certain personal qualities in the selection of students.

What you will do in this study:

In this study you will be invited to answer a series of open-ended questions about personal qualities that you believe to be relevant to counselling and about your experience on admissions committees, especially in relation to considering the personal qualities of candidates. These questions will be asked in a semi-structured telephone interview format. You may skip any questions that you do not wish to answer. This interview will be audio-recorded, with your consent.

Length of time:

Your participation in this study will take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. This includes time for us to review informed consent, to conduct the interview, and to address any questions you may have.

Withdrawal from the study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Should you agree to participate, you may withdraw without consequence at any time either during or after the interview. If you withdraw during the interview, your interview recording will be immediately destroyed. If you withdraw after the interview has been completed, you can ask to have the data from your interview withdrawn, at which time both the recorded interview and the transcript will be destroyed and nothing that you have contributed will be included in the research. This data removal will be possible up until the aggregation of all participant data on December 31st, 2016.

Possible benefits:

People who participate in this study may enjoy exploring and contributing to the discourse on the topics at hand.

Possible risks:

There are no known risks to participating in this study.

Confidentiality:

The ethical duty of confidentiality includes safeguarding participants' identities, personal information, and data from unauthorized access, use, or disclosure. You may choose to use a pseudonym during the taped interview in order to maximize the protection of your identity. However, your participation in this study is completely confidential and all published data will be anonymized.

Anonymity:

Anonymity refers to protecting participants' identifying characteristics, such as name or description of physical appearance. No identifying information will be solicited at any time during this interview, and should it arise, it will never be disclosed to anyone nor included in any reports or publications.

Recording of Data:

To enable qualitative analysis, your interview will be audio recorded with your consent. It will subsequently be transcribed by me.

Storage of Data:

Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored as encrypted files on this researcher's password-protected computer. Identifying information will be removed from the transcripts. My research supervisor, Dr. Harris, and I will be the only people with access to this data. Data will be kept for a minimum of five years as required by Memorial University's policy on Integrity in Scholarly Research.

Reporting of Results:

The data collected in this study will be presented in Heather Gower's Master's thesis, and results may be presented or published by the researchers. The thesis will be publicly available at the QEII library.

The data collected in this study will be reported without any personally identifying information. Any direct quotations will be anonymized, and in general the data will be presented thematically and in summarized form.

Sharing of Results with Participants:

Should you wish to know the results of this study, you are invited to email Heather Gower at hkg604@mun.ca, and a written summary will be provided.

Questions:

You are welcome to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research. If you would like more information about this study, please contact: Heather Gower, 780-937-4328, hkg604@mun.ca; or Dr. Greg Harris, 709-864-6925, gharris@mun.ca.

The proposal for this research has been reviewed by the Interdisciplinary Committee on Ethics in Human Research and found to be in compliance with Memorial University's ethics policy. If you have ethical concerns about the research, such as the way you have been treated or your rights as a participant, you may contact the Chairperson of the ICEHR at icehr@mun.ca or by telephone at 709-864-2861.

Consent:

Your consent means that:

- You have read the information about the research.
- You have been able to ask questions about this study.
- You are satisfied with the answers to all your questions.
- You understand what the study is about and what you will be doing.
- You understand that you are free to withdraw participation in the study without having to give a reason, and that doing so will not affect you now or in the future.

- You understand that if you choose to end participation **during** data collection, any data collected from you up to that point will be destroyed.
- You understand that if you choose to withdraw **after** data collection has ended, your data can be removed from the study up to December 31st, 2016.

Participant agrees to be audio-recorded

☐ Yes ☐ No

Participant agrees to the use of direct quotations

☐ Yes ☐ No

By consenting, you do not give up your legal rights and do not release the researchers from their professional responsibilities.

For oral consent:

I, Heather Gower, reviewed and explained this consent form with the participant before receiving the participant's consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.

Name of participant

Date

Signature of Principal Investigator

Researcher's Signature:

I have explained this study to the best of my ability. I invited questions and gave answers. I believe that the participant fully understands what is involved in being in the study, any potential risks of the study and that he or she has freely chosen to be in the study.

Signature of Principal Investigator

Date

Appendix C: Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Please tell me a bit about your background in serving on admissions committees for Master's-level counselling or counselling psychology programs (e.g., prompts: number of times served, number of institutions, number of years served). What is your theoretical orientation? Number of years of clinical practice? Number of years as a professor and faculty member?
2. How does your current (or most recent) institution conduct the process of admission reviews (e.g., prompts: interview, letters of reference, statement of intent)? What are the main inclusion and exclusion applicant criteria? How does your institution rank the importance of the inclusion criteria?
3. What personal qualities do you consider to be important to the practice of counselling? How do you define [insert each response]? Why do you consider [insert each response] to be important to the practice of counselling? Do you consider it important for the applicant to possess this characteristic prior to beginning graduate studies? Why?
4. Does your institution formally or explicitly assess for any personal qualities in its admissions process? If so, which ones and how? Do you or does your institution *informally* assess for any personal qualities in applicants? If so, which ones and how?
5. If you or your institution do not assess for personal qualities, why not?
6. Do you believe that it is important to assess for personal qualities during the admissions process? Why or why not? If so, how would you ideally incorporate this kind of assessment?
7. In your opinion, what are the costs and benefits of assessing for personal qualities such as [insert participant answers from #2] during the admissions process?
8. Is there anything else we missed today that you would like to add on this topic?

For the pilot interview:

9. How was this experience for you today?
10. Do you have any feedback or suggestions about the questions asked or the interview process in general?

Appendix D: Thematic Organization of the Research Results

Chapter 4: Admissions in Counselling

Theme 1: Descriptions of, and Reflections on, the Current Admissions Process

- a. Evolution of Process
- b. Application Criteria and Stages
- c. Rubrics, Ranking, and Subjectivity
- d. Specific Criteria Reflections
- e. Competition
- f. Gatekeeping
- g. Gateslipping
- h. Constraints to Gatekeeping

Theme 2: The Role of the Committee and its Members

- a. Power and Fairness
- b. Checks and Balances
- c. Experience
- d. Limits of Knowledge

Theme 3: Assessing Applicants

- a. Holism
- b. Extrapolation
- c. Paper versus Person
- d. Academics “versus” Personal Qualities

Chapter 5: Counsellor Personal Qualities and Admissions

Theme 1: Personal Qualities Important to Counsellors

- a. Intrapersonal Skills
 - i. Self-Aware and Self-Engaged
 - ii. Growth-Oriented
 - iii. Flexible/Open-Minded
 - iv. Professionally Dedicated and Aware
 - v. Conscientious
- b. Life Experience and Human Understanding
- c. Interpersonal Skills
 - i. Other-Aware
 - ii. Personable
 - iii. Empathic/Good Listener
 - iv. Caring/Desire to Help
 - v. Warm/Open
- d. Scholarly Abilities

Theme 2: Assessment of Personal Qualities during Admissions

- a. Current Practices
- b. Preferences about Personal Quality Assessments
- c. Issues in Assessing Personal Qualities
- d. Reflections on Interviews

Theme 3: General Considerations for Personal Qualities and Graduate School

- a. Training Personal Qualities
- b. Growth Orientation
- c. Self as Foundation